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THE STRANGE PARD; or, Little Ben's Death Hunt.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," "GIANT GEORGE," ETC., ETC.



SIDE BY SIDE THEY GALLOPED; TWO PERFECT TYPES OF CIVILIZED AND SAVAGE LIFE.

The Strange Pard;

OR,

Little Ben's Death Hunt.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM,

(MAJOR SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," "ARIZONA JACK," "GIANT GEORGE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

"DOG-GONE hit, cap'n, pull in! Make a dead stop right hyer, er yer outfit's bu'sted inter finders; an' thar won't be ary a ha'r lef' in ther hull party!"

"Ther mesquites air all what's saved yer bacon; an' ef ther tilt o' ther wagon shows 'bove ther bushes, er ther mules puts in some extry wags o' the'r years, yer'll be wiped out slick an' clean, sure es shootin'!"

"What do you mean, Old Rocky? I judge by your manner and words that danger is abroad."

"Wa-al, yer kin bet hefty on thet air; an' hit's ormighty clos't onter us. Thar's nigh on ter sixty red bellyuns comin' to'ard us, jist on ther lightnin'-hum reg'lar stompede speed, from ther west perrarer. Ef we-uns scrouges through, by ther skin o' our teeth, we'll be some consider'ble lucky."

"Whar in thunderation air Tonk? He an' I'll hev ter risk scalps, an' draw ther or'nary, bleed-suckin', ha'r-t'arin' red skunks to'ard ther Newersis, er everythin's gone ter smash—caliker an' all!"

The first speaker delivered his warning in a hasty voice; showing, as he spurred his horse in headlong haste into the mesquites, that he was filled with the deepest concern and apprehension.

The mesquites were but a mile in breadth, but extended north and south, for some miles, between the Rio Frio and Rio Nueces—an unbroken, level plain stretching between the two rivers.

Branching out from the ground, and standing in clumps, between which a wagon could easily pass, these mesquites were, on an average, about ten feet in height.

The man who dashed in among them, bringing his horse to a halt, as well as a tilted wagon, drawn by six well-fed mules, was addressed by the owner of the latter, as we have just heard, by the name of "Old Rocky."

He was a scout of great renown in the Southwest; was of medium size and height, but of iron sinews and nerves. His face was wrinkled, and much tanned by camp-fires and the southern sun, and his long hair was sprinkled with gray.

An old slouched, greasy sombrero was drawn low over his brow, and beneath it were small but bright keen eyes of hazel; his beard, of a kind that matched his hair, leaving but a small portion of his face visible.

The arms of the scout consisted of a huge bowie-knife, a long-barreled muzzle-loading rifle, and a pair of Colt's old-fashioned six-shooters of the pattern first used, and manufactured expressly for Jack Hayes's Texan Rangers. He was mounted upon an iron-gray mustang, equipped with the usual strings, loops, and lariat; together with his *serape*, or Mexican blanket, canteen, tin-cup, and *malettos* or saddle-bags.

The man addressed by Old Rocky, was a tall, raw-boned individual of perhaps sixty years of age; although the flash of his eye and his quick-spoken words indicated that he would be no easily vanquished foe. It was evident, indeed, that he was full of fire and muscular strength, unusual to one at his time of life.

His features now showed plainly that he was most painfully apprehensive and concerned by the words of the old scout, who, on his part, seemed only possessed with a spirit of impatience, as he gazed beyond the wagon, and between the clumps of mesquites.

At this moment, however, a pair of equestrians galloped into view; and were, in themselves, a sight that would call forth, from one seeing them for the first time, an ejaculation of extreme surprise and admiration.

Indeed, one of an artistic taste, would have been in raptures at the sight thus presented, amid the framework of mesquites, arched by the tropical sky.

Side by side they galloped; two perfect types of civilized and savage life, forming extreme

contrasts to each other, yet each claiming the admiration of the beholder.

One was a most beautiful maiden, with long, dark-brown and wavy hair, that hung unconfined, except by a Gypsy-like hat, adorned with prairie flowers.

Her eyes were dark, and bright and piercing, and her cheeks glowed with the rose-tint of perfect health.

She was attired in a riding-habit of rich colors, with a silken kerchief loosely tied about her neck, and her small hands were incased in embroidered gauntlets.

But, the other—ye gods!—he was one that would have caused a beholder to gaze with bated breath, so commanding was his lordly presence. His agile movements, his grace, and the centaur-like set of steed and man, seemed each to have been created for the other.

He was an Indian; his presence and the manner of the maiden proving him to be of a friendly tribe.

His raven hair almost swept the back of his horse, and was held in place behind his ears by a beaded fillet, into which were thrust three eagle-plumes—the insignia of a chief.

He was naked from the waist up, and his Apollo-like form showed great strength and suppleness. He wore ornamented moccasins, with thick double soles, and buckskin leggins deeply fringed and beaded. The points of these latter were secured to a belt, which held in place a red breech-cloth, and sustained a huge scalping-knife and a revolver.

His saddle, bridle and other equipments were like those of the scout already mentioned, while at his back was a short bow and quiver of arrows. His face was ornamented with narrow stripes of blue pigment and vermilion, as was also his brow. This, however, seemed but to add to his warlike and commanding appearance, rather than to lend to him anything of a hideous aspect.

But the most noticeable feature of the chief's savage make-up was the representation of a turtle, done upon his bronzed breast in different colored pigments; the head, tail and legs extended from the shell, as if in energetic motion.

As has been said, the new-comers seemed to be friendly to each other; the maiden laughing merrily, doubtless at some light remark of her own, for the countenance of the Indian was stoical, and betrayed nothing of the thoughts or impressions that might be governing his brain.

Red-man though he was, the beautiful girl who rode by his side could have found no more devoted friend than this same Turtle, the Tonkaway—the red pard of Old Rocky, Single-Eye and Big Foot Wallace, the scouts.

Reaching the wagon, the pair found that it had halted, and that Old Rocky was sitting his horse in front of the mule team, as if he had just arrived on the scene.

Seeing this, the manner of both suddenly changed.

The Indian at once knew, from the concerned appearance of the old scout, that something was wrong.

"Dang my ole heart, Tonk," exclaimed he, catching sight of his red pard, "I'm chuck full o' glad ter see yer!"

"Thar's hefty biz ahead, an' a big crop o' ha'r ter gather, else we-uns kin say 'now I lay me,' flop over an' make a die o' hit ter onc't."

"Cap'n, jist yeou step right hyer, an' lay low, fer ter listen ter music. Miss Mollie, jump yer critter an' crawl inter ther wagon speedy, fer thar's bleed, yells an' tortur' in ther perrarer air. Ef yer sot onter by ther bellyuns, make yer shooters talk fast, fer Tonk an' I hev got ter make a desp'rit drive fer ter git ther cusses offen thar course."

"We'll strike to'ards Newersis, an' ther scarifiers 'll foller, I reckon, which air ther only way ter save yer lives. Come, Tonk—no time fer gab. Every minnit now may be wo'th a human life."

There was no change in the face of the Tonkaway at this, except a deadly, revengeful glitter that flashed in his eye. He sat his horse, drinking in every word, and as Old Rocky concluded and at once spurred his steed forward, he cut the air with his quirt and dashed on like an arrow from the bow, after the old scout.

Soon, however, Old Rocky halted near the western verge of the mesquites. Then he sprang to the earth, and the Tonkaway bounded to his side.

"Jist gaze thar, Tonk," said the former, pointing to the west plain. "Ef thar ain't a sight ter make a few lone humans hev a crawl in' et ther ruts o' ther ha'r, I'm a dod-gasted, perrarer pervaricator, from ther word go!"

"Waugh!" burst from the lips of the Tonka-

way, as he instinctively clutched the handle of his scalping-knife. "Heap big war-party," he continued. "Trail point here. White chief with wheel-lodge lose scalps. Bright Eyes, she lose scalp. Mebbe so Old Rocky, Turtle lose scalp."

"Hit does look kinder bilious fer we-uns; but all on us c'u'd skute, givin' ther condemned kiotes a hefty raffle o' fun ef hit warn't fer ther leetle gal an' Marm Meredith. Hit's a dead sure thing though, thet they'd skupe us in, ef they war 'long, fer we'd be 'bleeged ter hole back on thar 'count."

"Howsomever, thar ain't no use ter sling gab. Yeou an' I, Tonk, must break bush, an' lead ther bellyuns on a chase to'ards ther Newersis. We kin sep'rate afore we strike ther Souse Lakes; an' ef we're hard pressed, we kin jump fer dirt, an' take water. Mebbe so we kin skin through, but any how hit's gut ter be did, or Cap'n Meredith an' his lay-out, ther angel in caliker counted in, 'll be all swept inter kingdom come."

"Shell we lunge out now, Tonk? I'm ready ter shout, an' show a clean pa'r o' heels."

"Turtle is ready," was the laconic reply, as the Tonkaway whirled, and sprung into his saddle. Old Rocky also remounted, secured his lariat, and gathered reins.

"Wait," he said, "ontil I give ther word; an' keep 'bout ten jumps from my critter, 'longside. I reckon we kin wipe out a few, an' spile some on 'em fer futur' fightin', arter ther kiotes lunge out arter us."

It was a most terrible sight that now presented itself to the view of our friends; especially when, as was the case, the lives of those who had trusted to their guidance, and who had become very dear to them during a short trip, depended entirely upon their sagacity and cunning in this emergency.

About half a mile from their lookout were fully sixty Apache warriors, lashing their half-wild steeds at terrific speed toward the line of mesquites, seemingly unsuspecting of the presence of foes in their front.

All were bent forward in their saddles, feathers, hair, and scalps flaunting in the wind that was created by their headlong speed: thus, on they came, arrows rattling, quirts hissing, mustangs snorting—the lightning-like flying of hundreds of hoofs through the prairie grass, and the dull rumble, causing a sound like the rush of a coming "norther."

In two long lines, stretching north and south, thus on swept the Apache war-party; a horde of bloodthirsty fiends, to whom mercy was unknown, and torture an exultant joy that bordered on frenzy!

Like an avalanche of horror, on they came; a sight that was most hellish to contemplate, eager for blood, for scalps, for revenge upon the hated Texanos of the lower Rio Frio and Rio Nueces.

Just as the fearful-looking double line of paint-daubed, feather-bedizened fiends reached a point, about a quarter of a mile from the mesquites, the daring old scout and his red pard, Turtle, the Tonkaway, urged their horses slowly out from the green screen of dense foliage, pretending to have been unconscious all the while of anything like enemies in their vicinity until they were several paces from the mesquites.

Then, feigning to have just discovered the Apaches, they half-whirled their horses, and spurred south at breakneck speed, galloping parallel with the line of bushes; while, out from three-score of throats, rung the blood-chilling, appalling war-whoops of the Apaches, who now turned their snorting steeds, in hot pursuit of the pair whom they evidently believed to be doomed.

The very height of exultation was manifest in the terrific, joyous yells of the savages, as they recognized the detested Tonkaway, and the celebrated scout, who had slain so many of their tribe.

Faster flew their quirts, while their faces grew more hideous, and their yells more appalling and hellish, as the war-cry of the Tonkaway, in taunting intonation, and the Texan yell of Old Rocky were shot back; accompanied by derisive gestures from the daring and reckless pair, who flew before them.

CHAPTER II.

THE PURSUIT.

"DOG-GONE my ole heart, Tonk! We-uns made ther raffle so fur; pulled ther wool over ther red cusses' peepers, an' I reckon saved ther folkses et ther waggia from bein' scarified,

skinned an' toasted. But we hed a purty slim show ter skin out o' this, an' carry our nat'ral head-gear.

"We-uns hes ther 'vantage o' nags, but or-mighty leetle time ter hunt holes arter strikin' kiver. Reckon I'll gi'n ole kill-nigger a show to spoke a word."

Thus yelled Old Rocky, as he and the Tonkaway flew over the plain; the deafening shouts of the pursuing Apaches, however, making it almost impossible for Turtle to catch a word.

However, the old scout was one who would have his say, even in the most perilous moments; speech seeming to relieve him.

The Tonkaway, more from the movements of his white pard than from the words, realized his intention; and his eyes blazed with furious longing, as he drew his rifle from its holder, turned partly in his saddle, at the same moment as did the old scout, took quick aim, and pulled trigger.

The almost simultaneous report caused a chorus of vengeful and furious yells from the war-party, as two of the braves threw up their arms, and with horrible death-howls, fell over on the plain. This caused a momentary confusion in the middle of the line, but the east and west wings dashed on most furiously, doubly eager for revenge; while, at the same time, a volley of arrows shot toward the pursued, the whirling steel points glittering and glinting in the red light of the declining sun.

Quickly reloading, as the feathered shafts struck the earth in their rear, Turtle and the old scout again pointed weapons, one to the east and the other to the west wing of the advancing Apaches; and again there was confusion, caused by two more warriors being struck by the leaden messengers of death.

Our friends, however, now, began to see that they had lost ground; and reasoned that, as they had been in the saddle since morning, without having given their animals sufficient rest at noon, and the mustangs of the enemy being comparatively fresh, before, therefore, they could reach the timber in their front, which bordered on the Souse Lakes, they would be within range of the Apache bows, and could not hope to escape death.

In one way alone could this be prevented; and that was, by causing momentary confusion among the war-party, during which they themselves could make up, or keep a safe distance from the death-dealing shafts.

Something must now be done, Old Rocky realized, or they were lost. A little advantage had been gained, as we have seen, in the beginning of the chase; and they must now put their hopes in similar tactics.

Neither the old scout nor the Tonkaway had, as yet, put their horses to such speed as the situation would warrant; for they did not wish to injure the animals, but, now, as their danger became more apparent, all thoughts of saving their horses were banished, and but little hope was entertained of being able, themselves, to escape. They knew that, should they be so fortunate as to gain the timber alive, they would be forced to spring from their steeds, and run to some place of concealment; and, as this was realized, the old scout also reasoned that, should they separate, they would not only gain in distance, but one or the other would be more likely to escape.

Their separation would cause confusion, necessitate a division of the war-party, and consequent delay. All this would enable the daring pair to regain some of the distance which they had lost.

"Skute fer ther west eend o' ther Souse Lakes!"

Thus yelled Old Rocky in the ears of Turtle, as he spurred his horse alongside the animal of his red pard.

"We'll dewide ther condemned scum o' ther Pecos, which'll gi'n us a show fer our ha'r. Ef they press clos't onter yer, jump from yer nag, an' take ter water; then glide east, an' I'll skute to'ards yer locate."

"We'll mix 'em up ter-night, and then levant back ter ther waggin, which'll hev ter be p'inted back to'ard ther Frio, er ther hull outfit'll be kerral'd."

"Air hit all hunk, Tonk?"

"Heap good council talk. Turtle get Apache scalps on lake. Lose so many,"—holding up four fingers. "Make Turtle heap mad—want sound war-cry. Kill heap Apaches."

"We kin skupe some on 'em in outen ther dew ter-night, on ther sly; so don't weep fer lost ha'r," returned Old Rocky, encouragingly. "Keep yer grip, an' jine me es soon es yer kin. So long, Tonk!"

Waving a hand to each other, both now spur-

red off at right angles; one dashing southeast and the other southwest.

Fierce yells from the pursuing Indians greeted this movement, and, as Old Rocky had reasoned it occasioned a halt, and consequent delay in the pursuit.

This, however, was but momentary. Soon a score of warriors were flying over the plain, in pursuit of Old Rocky; the same number after Turtle.

There was a look of satisfaction on the face of the old scout as he turned, and saw the success of the strategy. But this soon gave place to a scowl of deep concern and anxiety, as he saw that nearly as many more braves were now dashing on the back trail. The Apaches had thus divided into three parties; those with the slain braves hastening back to the point at which he and the Tonkaway had started from the mesquites. Old Rocky at once decided that they had grown suspicious.

Evidently, they reasoned that there must be more whites in the line of mesquites, and that the old scout had been acting as their guide. Hence their return to investigate.

No sooner did he discover this undreamed-of movement, than he gave a wild yell, to draw the attention of Turtle. He then waved his hand in the direction of the Indians who had galloped northward.

An answering gesture and whoop were returned, proving that the Tonkaway understood the situation, and that a necessity had arisen for him to rejoin Old Rocky as soon as possible, after evading the Apaches. This must be done under cover of the approaching night; and then, they could hasten back to the relief of their friends, whom they had left with the wagon.

The plain was now open as far as eye could reach, and there was no possible opportunity to return by circling; even were their horses equal to such a long and terrible race. Not five miles ahead of them was the towering green timber, that fringed the shores of the Souse Lakes. Beyond these, there was the serpentine line of trees, that marked the course of the Rio Nueces.

Neither Old Rocky nor Turtle felt any apprehension in regard to their escaping death or capture, could they but reach the friendly timber; although they were sure they would be forced to lose their prized steeds, but to regain which, they were resolved to risk everything the coming night.

The frantic fury of their pursuers was now increased by the taunting yells of the two men at every bound; the Apaches being also puzzled at the disdain thus manifested by men who must know that escape was impossible. This made them almost certain that there must be a strong party of whites within the timber ahead; or otherwise, they surely would not dash for its shelter, in such a reckless and confident manner.

Still the two parties of Apache braves went skimming along the plain, at breakneck speed, sparing not their animals in the least, and soon were some two miles apart; the pursued, thus far, having quartered toward the timber. But, at this distance, both the old scout and the Tonkaway took a half turn, and darted straight toward the Souse Lakes; a course which would leave them separated only by the two miles, when the lakes were reached.

However, this slight change in their course gave the pursuers some little advantage; which was hailed with exultant yells, while the distance between themselves and their expected victims became less and less. The reason of this was, that neither Turtle nor Old Rocky put their animals to full speed; they wishing to make a grand spurt, just before reaching the timber, for the purpose of gaining time to secrete themselves, or swim to the opposite side of the lakes. Both men were now pointed toward a narrow portion of the same, for the purpose of giving them a better chance to escape.

It was, indeed, a terrible race, and one that taxed the mustangs of the Indians to the utmost; but an Apache has no heart, no mercy for the animal he bestrides. He will ride the beast to death, even when in pursuit of game. So on, at a labored lope, they went; until within less than an arrow-shot of their hated foes, wishing to take the two men alive for the torture.

Consequently, they refrained from the use of their bows; so sure were they of their prey.

Then it was, that a surprise awaited them.

For, when their paint-daubed breasts were filled to the uttermost with exultation, and but a short distance intervened between them and the pursued, and when the timber was but a quarter of a mile in their front; both Turtle and Old Rocky, as if by pre-arranged signal, al-

though quite two miles apart, turned simultaneously in their saddles, and fired their rifles into the mad, eager hordes so close behind them.

Then, while yet the death-howl sounded, each let fly a half-dozen well-directed revolver-shots, into the yelling Apache ranks; and then, dashing spurs, they flew toward the green shades at double the speed heretofore maintained.

Every bullet fulfilled, at least, a part of its mission; and the howls of death-stricken braves, the yells of the wounded, and the whoops of mad fury, mingled with the snorts of terrified steeds, and the lash of the terrible quirts, as every brave, who was able to sit in the saddle, now dashed in frenzy toward the river, leaving the dead and dying upon the plain.

The Apaches thus realized, when too late, that the cunning scouts had outwitted them, and would undoubtedly escape; as the sun had now sunk, and the timber was darkened by coming night.

Only a few bounds had the Apache mustangs made, after the disastrous fire of their foes, which had brought all to a halt in confusion, when, in their front, nothing was to be seen except the towering, moss-draped timber, the dense undergrowth, and a narrow strip of sward.

Over this last, the mad hordes galloped, and went crashing into the bushes, with fierce whoops and vengeful yells.

CHAPTER III.

LOVE ON THE BORDER.

WHEN Turtle and Old Rocky dashed from the vicinity of the wagon, and disappeared from view, the owner of the "outfit," who had been addressed by the old scout as "cap'n," turned quickly to the fair equestrienne, who had not as yet obeyed the order of Old Rocky, and exclaimed:

"Mollie, my dear daughter, I very much fear that we are in most deadly peril. I was greatly concerned at your absence, although there have been no Indian raids through this section in many months. But for the express orders of our old guide, which I was very much inclined to disregard, we should have been in the open plain, instead of being within these mesquites, which are not easy to travel through."

"In that case, we should doubtless have been captured by this war-party, which Old Rocky has so providentially discovered."

"But, father," returned the girl, her cheeks turning pale suddenly, "do you understand that Turtle and Old Rocky have gone with the express purpose of exposing themselves to capture or death, in an attempt to draw the Indians from this quarter, thus preserving our lives at the probable sacrifice of their own?"

"That is just what they are about to do," was the reply.

"They are indeed most noble-hearted men," said his daughter, with deep feeling; "but, if there are as many Indians as Old Rocky seems to think, I fear we shall never see either him or the faithful Tonkaway again."

"Well, there is no time for talk. I must view the danger ahead, at any cost; though I shall promise not to expose myself. I will leave my horse here, and walk to the edge of the mesquites."

As Captain Meredith spoke, he dismounted, and secured his animal to one of the wheels of the wagon.

"Oh, father, do not leave us, I beg of you!" pleaded Mollie. "Indeed I think that Turtle and Old Rocky ought to have remained. There is no one but James to protect mother and Bennie; and I feel so much concerned in regard to mother, who must be sleeping at this time."

"Do, father, please allow me to accompany you?"

The driver of the wagon, a young man of graceful appearance, and apparently of uncommon muscular strength, had sprung to the ground at the moment of Old Rocky's appearance, and grasped the bridles of the leading mules; but, as the peril of the party was revealed, he quickly secured the animals to a strong mesquite tree, and procuring a Colt's carbine from the wagon-box, stood ready for defense.

Although this young man was clad in the rough apparel common to teamsters, a glance into his intelligent blue eyes, and at the gentlemanly bearing that marked his actions, would convince one that he was above his present station.

His chin and face were so covered with a dark brown beard, and his slouched sombrero was worn so low over his brow, that but little of his features were revealed. But any close observer

would have decided, from the actions and manner of the teamster, that he was far more anxious in regard to his employer's family, than his station would naturally call for. Especially did he seem to be interested in the beautiful daughter of Captain Meredith.

The latter hesitated only for a moment, after Mollie had spoken. He then addressed the teamster, rather nervously:

"James, are Mrs. Meredith and my son asleep?"

"Both asleep this last half-hour, sir," the young man replied.

"All right," rejoined the captain. "For awhile, at least, they will be free from fear and a knowledge of danger."

"Keep by the wagon and guard them with your life, my man. Now, my child," turning to Mollie, "I will say that I must have a view of the plain. Our lives hang in the balance, if Old Rocky's words prove true, and he is not one to raise a false alarm. Had not he and Turtle taken the course they have, we should doubtless have been discovered, and all of us massacred."

"But come, Mollie, we will go at once. Guard well my treasures, James!"

Captain Meredith stalked forward, as he finished speaking, followed by his daughter, who carried her rifle as though she were well used to the use of the weapon.

As the young girl passed the teamster the hand of the letter was quickly thrust forward, clasping the palm of the maiden, and he whispered hurriedly:

"For God's sake—for your own and my sake, Mollie, be prudent! Do not expose yourself to danger. I shall be in tortures until you return."

"Never fear for me, Randal," was the confident reply. "I shall use great caution. Take care of my mother and brother."

This side-play was unperceived by Captain Meredith, and Mollie glided quickly to her father's side, both soon reaching a point at the edge of the mesquites, from which they could view the west plain. Their terrible horror may be imagined upon beholding the long line of fierce Apache warriors, just as the latter discovered Turtle and the old scout emerging from the screen of bushes, and galloping toward the Rio Nueces.

Instinctively the young girl drew backward, her face the pallor of death, and her eyes staring in terror.

Even the iron frame of Captain Meredith seemed to cringe, as if it had received a terrible shock; and no wonder was it, for such a dreadful sight he had never even dreamed of, or believed it could exist upon earth.

But their horror was as nothing to their agonizing concern in regard to the two brave men, who, repudiating all thought of self, had exposed themselves to almost certain death in order to decoy the Apaches from the mesquites.

"God forgive me for bringing my darlings into this terrible danger!" burst from the captain's lips. "That sight is enough to appal the stoutest heart. I have never believed one-half of the stories I have heard so often from the scouts and rangers in San Antonio, but now I can believe the worst that is reported. I tremble for the safety of our two friends. I see no hope for them."

From the fact that the pursuing Apaches were in the rear of the scouts, and between them and the observers, the parties seemed much nearer each other than they were in reality.

"Oh, father! Why did you not locate on the Frio, and not come so far from civilization? I know you have been terribly wronged, and that our fallen fortunes warn you against being again defrauded by old titles; but we ought not to jeopardize our lives, or the lives of others, by advancing thus far toward the Rio Grande. This is a warning not to be disregarded."

"Poor mother! If she had seen these Apaches and heard their yells, I really believe she would have died with fright. Do you think she may have heard them, papa?"

"It is quite possible, Mollie. I should judge they might have been heard for miles. But, indeed, I agree with you. I don't want to proceed after this experience; indeed, nothing would induce me to venture further south. We will at once turn back to the Frio, but it goes against the grain to risk those who have so nobly risked their lives for us."

"We cannot help them in the least, father; and I know if they could communicate with us, they would say, 'Back to the Frio with you, as fast as the mules can run!' Indeed they have braved death to give us time and opportunity to do so."

"You are right, Mollie. We will linger no longer than to rest the mules. If Old Rocky

and Turtle elude the Indians at the Rio Nueces, they will hasten here, and follow our trail, soon rejoining us."

"But, look there, my child! As I live, they are firing into the Apaches. They have sent their bullets home; for two braves are down, and all is confusion—"

"Bravo!" cried Mollie, in exultation. "Why, father, those Apaches cannot be as terrible as they appear, when we consider that two men dare face them in that way."

"There are no two other men in the whole country who dare attempt such a feat," said Captain Meredith. "It was grand and heroic in the extreme. But, I suppose, you do not wish to change your desire in regard to our making an immediate retreat?"

"This is a case, papa, where 'distance lends not only enchantment to the view,' but promises safety. We must bear in mind that the return of that war-party is not improbable; and should they discover us—oh, horror! I dare not think of it!"

"Please return," said the captain, "and request James to give the mules some corn. I will stay a short time while the animals eat and watch the chase."

"I am very anxious in regard to the scouts; but we will proceed in a very short time on our return, driving all night, for I am apprehensive that the Indians may gallop back to inspect the mesquites."

"There go two more flashes! Hark! Did you hear the report of the rifles, Mollie?"

"Yes, but very faintly. How I hope those brave men may escape!"

"Hasten," said Captain Meredith. "I feel that we are hovering on the brink of the deadliest danger."

Without a word, the maiden ran through the mesquites, and was met by the teamster, who said in a low voice:

"Thank Heaven you have returned, my darling! I cannot bear this disguise much longer. I even pray for some danger, through which I may in some way, win your father's regard and respect."

"Oh, Randal! don't be discouraged. By this disguise we are enabled to be together. But hasten, and give the mules corn; for we must soon speed back to the Frio."

"I regret that your father has thus decided, Mollie; but I will do as you say. As to the Apaches, they are, I have always heard, a merciless tribe; and I do not think we could defend ourselves against this war-party."

"I am in hopes, however, that these brave men will succeed in eluding the red demons."

With gestures of caution to the young man, Mollie Meredith stepped on the wagon-pole, and peered into the vehicle. Regaining the ground, she again spoke softly:

"Mother and Bennie are asleep, and I am thankful for it. I feared those war-whoops would awaken them. Randal, dear, I know you are sacrificing your independence to please me; but I should have been, oh, so unhappy, had you not accompanied us. And this, you know, is the only way in which you could have done it."

"What the future may have in store for us, we cannot tell. I regret my father's unaccountable antipathy toward you; but I hope and pray that all will end well."

"It goes against the grain greatly, Mollie; but I would sacrifice my life for you. We will wait and watch; but do not torture me by venturing from the vicinity of the wagon, or I shall lose command of myself, desert the team, and rush to your side, for I know the dangers of the border better than you do."

At this moment, the attention of both was drawn by the whisking of branches, and Captain Meredith came toward them in great haste, his face ghastly, as he yelled:

"Turn the team, James! For God's sake, hasten! Lash the mules at a gallop on the back trail. Mount your horse, Mollie, or join your mother in the wagon. The red devils are coming back, and will be here in half an hour. May God preserve my darlings!"

"Father," said the young girl, in forced calmness, "where are the scouts? Do you really think that you saw aright? What can it all mean?"

"Yes, yes! It is plain enough. Do not question me; but do as I bid you. The Indians have divided their party: some pursue the scouts toward the Nueces, and the others are galloping this way in mad haste. For heaven's sake!—this, to his wife—"go to the rear of the wagon, and keep quiet. We are going back to the Frio. Danger is in our rear."

Upon first speaking, the captain mounted his

horse, and his last words were addressed to a pale and trembling woman, who, from the piles of goods, leaned forward, with horror-stricken eyes, toward the speaker.

"Oh, mother, go back, and don't awaken Bennie!" exclaimed Mollie. "We shall soon reach a place of safety."

Meanwhile, James, as the captain called the teamster, had lost no time in getting the mules in readiness to depart; and, as the maiden addressed her mother, he sprang into his saddle, on the wheeler, jerked the mules around, and dashed the team through the mesquites toward the north. By this time the terrified mother, with prayers on her quivering lips, had regained her former position in the rear of the wagon—the closely drawn tilt shutting out all view.

On rattled the wagon at great speed, the mules going at a gallop, Captain Meredith and his daughter, with their rifles at half-cock, at times gazing in their rear, galloping close behind the wagon.

James frequently leaned to one side in his saddle, gazing in apprehension on the back trail, where the, to him, maiden of all maidens in the universe, occupied a most dangerous position in case of attack or pursuit.

Should it come to that, the young man resolved that he would jump from his saddle, and protect her with his life at the first sight of savage foe.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE WING.

THE sun had sunk below the horizon, but the western heavens were of a fiery hue, enabling one to see his way within the timber, when Turtle the Tonkaway dashed into the dense undergrowth bordering the chain of water-holes, known as the Souse Lakes.

The Apaches, he well knew, were not far behind him.

So close, indeed, were they, that Turtle knew it would be impossible for him to swim to the opposite side of the water-hole, narrow though it was, without being at their mercy. As the thought flashed into his mind, a plan of escape was formed almost as quickly.

Slinging his carbine to his back, and detaching the lariat from his saddle, he secured the rope to his belt, and made ready to carry out his plan.

Soon guiding his horse near to the trunk of a huge tree, from which depended an intricate mass of vines and drooping Spanish moss, he sprang to a standing posture in his saddle, gave the animal a terrific blow with his quirt; grasping, at the same time, a large vine which he knew was well braced, and quickly disappeared amid the thick foliage and moss.

The horse, with frantic bounds, plunged onward, and down along the bank of the lake to the left.

The exultant yells of the Apaches, as they now urged their mustangs into the timber, served to hasten the flight of the Tonkaway's steed; and the plunging of their own animals through the undergrowth drowned the sound of crashing bushes caused by the beast.

The horse, providentially for Turtle, soon fell into a wash-out, or gully, that was completely concealed by an arch of intertwined bushes. This gully led direct to the lake; and along its bed the animal now walked, soon reaching the water, and drinking with avidity, while screened by the overhanging bushes.

But, to return to our friend, the Tonkaway.

The plan of escape conceived by Turtle, he had executed as quickly as it passed through his mind; and, no sooner had he gained a position that was secure from observation, than the fierce yells of the Apaches cut the air, and filled him with fury and thirst for revenge. In a moment, he had secured the slack end of his lasso about a stout limb, adjusted the noose, and stood with the coil over his arm, ready to use it.

His eyes blazed with intense hatred and vengeful fury, as the maddened horde came crashing through the undergrowth beneath his covert. This fact assured the Tonkaway of his safety. He now bent low, and cast piercing glances toward the plain, to note which was the last brave in the chase.

Having thus by inspection and a fine calculation, noted the rearmost Apache, Turtle made ready for his desperate undertaking. The bushes he had observed, increased in height toward the lake, and in consequence, those at the front, could not, after passing the tree in which he was ensconced, see their brother braves who were following them.

This decided the Tonkaway to carry out an-

other plan, which was quickly conceived as were the first and second.

On beneath him, dashed the furious Apaches, bringing their panting mustangs, while their black, snake-like eyes thirsted for revenge upon the man who had led them such a long race, and who affiliated with the whites.

The face of the rearmost brave was contorted with fiendish rage, but it was a passion that was to be instantaneously changed to agony and horror, for, as his horse sprung beneath the covert of the Tonkaway, the latter dexterously cast his deadly lasso in such a manner that the noose fell over the neck of the brave.

The next instant the rope tightened with a vicious twang, and the warrior was jerked from his mustang so quickly that he dropped his knife, his weight tightening the lariat beyond the possibility of allowing another breath to enter the lungs of the doomed brave.

As soon as Turtle saw that he had accomplished the death of his foe, he sprung far out from the branch and landed directly in the saddle of his victim.

It was an almost instantaneous change of riders.

Drawing his knife, he pricked the beast forward to the point where its late savage master swayed back and forth at the end of the fatal lasso.

The Apache was slowly choking out his life, his eyes bulging from their sockets, in his death-agony.

Urging the terrified mustang to the side of the struggling brave, Turtle grasped the feather-bedizened head, and soon was waving the gory scalp in triumph.

Securing the trophy to his belt, the Tonkaway quickly detached the lariat from the mustang, sprung to the earth, and, with his knife, urged the beast back toward the plain. He now stole cautiously beneath the undergrowth, down the lake, and parallel with the bank.

He well knew that it was impossible for the Apaches to trail his horse until the morning, and besides, they had themselves destroyed the trail at the point where he had sprung into the tree. That his disappearance would mystify them, he felt assured, and when they discovered their dead comrade, their fury would be terrible.

He felt, however, that he was safe from their clutches.

Quickly Turtle now paced on, in order to put some distance between himself and his foes. Fortunate as he had thus far been, he did not once dream that he could be further favored to such a degree.

But so time proved. For, upon hastening down the bed of the gully to assuage his thirst, he came unexpectedly upon his much-prized horse.

He felt that he could now escape and join Old Rocky.

Not only was Turtle much concerned and anxious in regard to the safety of the old scout; but he was also filled with the same feelings in regard to Captain Meredith and his family, having every reason to fear that they would be attacked by the Apaches, who had started on the back trail.

The one way open for Turtle now, however, was to swim the lake, and this he could not hope to accomplish in safety, until the Apaches had been in some manner drawn away from the bank.

All was now still as death, and the Tonkaway reasoned that his foes must be sitting their fagged mustangs in a state of bewilderment, puzzled by his mysterious disappearance. This silence, however, did not last long. A few guttural orders reached the ears of the listener, and soon he knew that the baffled braves were beating the bushes, searching for him.

The next thing would be a discovery of the dead brave.

This would make them still more furious, and would cause them to bend their energies and skill to discover them.

Realizing this, and wishing to cross the lake as soon as possible, he resolved to cause another sudden disappearance, which would draw attention from the lake.

With this object in view, Turtle hastened up the gully, leaving his carbine secreted near his horse.

The red glow in the east had now vanished, but the full round moon cast its silvery light in bars and arrows down into the shades of the timber. The Tonkaway felt positive that the Apaches were ignorant of the existence of this "wash out," and upon their ignorance he built his hopes of making his escape with his horse.

He waited for the discovery of the dead brave, knowing that the Apaches would at once be drawn to the spot.

This would be the signal for his attempt to cross the lake.

Suddenly a sound in the bushes convinced him that one of his foes was approaching, and instantly he resolved that another scalp should hang at his belt, and that the approaching brave should serve as the other victim to work his enemies up to a perfect fury.

Hastily the Tonkaway made his way through the bushes, quickly climbed a tree, and, as before, secured the end of his lariat to a limb, feeling intense satisfaction at the prospect of another scalp from the Apaches.

On came the brave, exactly as he had expected.

When the mustang had reached a favorable position, Turtle again cast a deadly noose, and, as before, it was a success. The next instant the Apache was swaying without the power of uttering a death-cry.

The mustang, however, having been at a walk, there was in consequence much less of a jerk than on the former occasion, so the muscles were not paralyzed, and the horrified brave clutched the rope with a desperate grip, and endeavored to draw himself up.

Turtle realized his own danger in a moment. The Apache would give a howl as soon as he had thus relieved himself. Sliding to the earth, the Tonkaway buried his knife to the hilt in the breast of his horrified victim, scalping the warrior, while he was yet struggling in the death-agony.

Scarcely had he fastened this second trophy to his belt, when a long-drawn howl sounded through the timber, quick followed by yells from all points.

The Apaches all knew that death had claimed one of their number, and all now sped toward the spot.

A way of escape was now open. Turtle ran down the bed of the wash-out, sprung upon his horse, urged the animal into the water, and in five minutes was on the opposite shore.

Turning his steed, facing the lake, the Tonkaway, during a moment of silence, shot forth the war-cry of his tribe in triumph and gave a loud and taunting yell. These sounds were so uttered that the Apaches would not know that he was over the lake. He then disappeared into the dark shades, heading east toward the point where the other party of Apaches had chased Old Rocky into the woods bordering on the lower end of the chain of water holes.

CHAPTER V. A RETROSPECT.

THREE months previous to the commencement of our story, Captain Martin Meredith had been thought one of the wealthiest citizens of San Antonio; owning, or supposing that he owned, nearly an entire street, composed of ancient Spanish-American built dwellings, then the predominating style in the Alamo City.

The captain had formerly resided in Louisiana, where he was an extensive planter, and owned a large number of slaves; but being somewhat of a vain man, and fond of ostentatious show, he had lived beyond his means, losing much of his property at cards, at that day the all-absorbing passion of the planters.

With the remnant of his fortune, he then went to Texas, taking with him his wife, and a daughter, some six years of age.

Feeling that San Antonio was destined to be a flourishing city, he purchased property, on a street which ran parallel with the river, west of the old mill, and foot-bridge.

The captain came of an old family of Louisiana; and, as has been said, was very proud and reserved. Consequently he had asked for no information in regard to the validity of the titles given by American residents of the old Spanish town. All went well for a time.

The property, purchased and held by Martin Meredith, in the course of a few years increased in value to double the amount he had paid for the same; and he felt that he was on the road to greater wealth than he had possessed in his most palmy days.

A son was born to him, whom he named Benfold, after the family of his wife; but the latter, after the birth of this child, became a confirmed invalid.

The daughter, a very beautiful girl, was kept at her studies in the Convent School.

At the time to which we have alluded, the property of Captain Meredith was wrested from him by a Castilian family, who held an old so-called Spanish title to the land.

It had been a great blow to the captain, when

he had been forced to part with his slaves and plantation in Louisiana; but the last totally undreamed-of misfortune was almost overwhelming. He became nearly insane.

Gathering his energies, at length, he resolved to go beyond the line of civilization, pre-empt a section of land, and invest the wreck of his fortune in stock raising.

Previous to this, the captain had made a discovery that confirmed him in his resolution.

Walking in the gardens connected with his residence, he perceived a young man seated with his fair daughter, and holding the hand of the young girl lovingly in his own. There was no mistaking what it meant.

Furious with anger, Captain Meredith would not hear a word from either of the lovers, in explanation.

With violent threats of what would happen should he venture to return, the young man was ordered from the grounds. Proudly, and without a word in reply, the youth strode away, waving his hand to Mollie, in adieu.

Recovering somewhat from his anger, the irate father sought his daughter, and demanded an explanation of what he termed her undutiful and unladylike conduct.

The girl had inherited much of her father's pride and independence of character. She asked no forgiveness but frankly acknowledged that she had become acquainted with Randal Rockwell some months previous, that he was everything that was noble and good, and that she loved him, and should continue to do so, with all her heart and soul. It was the old, old story.

Captain Meredith was beside himself with rage.

He swore that when Mollie married, it should be to a man of his choice. The girl said nothing, but the expression of her features showed an unbending will; and her father began to realize, for the first time, that his child was much like himself in disposition.

But he was determined to prevent the lovers from again meeting. He resolved to trace out this young Rockwell, and ascertain his character and standing; though he felt assured that the young man was without fortune or family. The captain learned that the obnoxious youth was a clerk in the Quartermaster's Department, at the Alamo Mission, and that he was in receipt of but a paltry salary. That settled it.

He could gain no intelligence in regard to the young man's family connections; but every thing indicated that he was a mere roaming adventurer.

All this was speedily communicated to Miss Mollie, and somewhat exaggerated at that; but she merely laughed, and informed her indignant parent, that what he had been at such trouble to find out, she could have told him herself.

But the girl knew the stubbornness and pride of her father, and had determined upon a mode of action which went far to convince him that she could not be very deeply in love after all.

And the young lady played her self-appointed part to perfection, dancing and singing through the gardens as though no troublesome thoughts had ever entered her mind. This, together with her bantering words to her father, when she advised him to get his rifle in order, and shoot Randal the next time he passed the house, if he dared even to stop, and gaze at it—all this convinced Captain Meredith that she was not in love.

But, to her mother, Mollie confided all her secrets; and Mrs. Meredith, who had met Randal Rockwell, was, on the whole, favorably impressed with the young man.

Mollie was devotedly attached to her father, and it was only her knowledge of how it was certain to be received, that made her withhold her confidence from him at the first.

Notwithstanding this assumed manner, the maiden was continually in a state of anxiety; fearing that some one would seek to defame Randal to her father, and reveal the fact that she still met him in a secret manner.

Although but a clerk in government employ, and to all appearance in straitened circumstances, young Rockwell bore the impress of a gentleman; his education was of a high order, proving that he had been reared far above his present station, and he was respected and esteemed by all with whom he came in contact. But he was one who said little of himself, and boasted of no wealthy or distinguished relatives.

Mrs. Meredith had herself been in humble circumstances at the time of her marriage with the captain, and she felt great sympathy with the lovers, striving to give her daughter hope

and comfort. She was, indeed, in possession of a secret, which, had she been permitted by Randal to reveal it to her husband, would have made the latter look with much more favor upon him.

In this way matters were situated when Captain Meredith was prostrated by the loss of nearly everything that he had on earth, except the love of his family. A dangerous illness followed, through which Mollie nursed him, and also attended to the wants of her now almost demented mother.

Little Ben, at this time but fourteen years of age, was a bright youth of great promise, and assisted his sister greatly in her many cares; both resolving that no stranger hand should minister to the wants of their parents.

Randal Rockwell, during the continuance of the illness of the Merediths, was filled with constant anxiety, and distressed at not being able to prove his regard and friendship for the family. He could not even meet the darling of his heart as heretofore.

However, Captain Meredith had a constitution of iron. He soon recovered, but was more morose and haughty than before; much to the surprise of his family and friends, who had hoped that his fallen fortunes would cause him to show more humility.

Great was the consternation and amazement of Randal, when Mollie, shortly after the recovery of the captain, informed him, with bitter tears, that her father had decided to leave San Antonio, and establish a ranch on the wild lands of the frontier, there to engage in the raising of cattle and horses.

Randal was frantic, but as he manifested such hopeless despair in regard to the matter—a show of feeling which was a great consolation to the object of it—she arose, equal to the emergency.

The young girl suggested to him, that, as they could not live apart without suffering continual anxiety, each on the other's account, and as marriage was out of the question for the present, that he should disguise himself, and secure the situation of driver of the wagon in which their few household effects were to be transported to the frontiers.

Mollie excused herself for proposing such a humiliating position for her lover; but, puzzle her mind as she might, she could conceive no other plan.

But, although the proposal was advanced in words that were most enticing—a hand of the fair girl resting upon either shoulder of her lover at the time, and her beautiful eyes gazing devotedly into his—she did not, for a moment, suppose that he would look with much favor upon the plan.

But Randal gave her a most joyous surprise.

He folded her in his arms, thanking her ten thousand times for having thought of such a scheme—the only one that could have been conceived, that would give them the opportunity of being together; and above all things, give him the happiness of watching over her, and protecting her amid the many dangers of the wilds.

So it was speedily arranged. Without hesitating for an instant, the young man agreed to Mollie's plan as soon as it was proposed; in fact, eagerly, and with the most intense relief.

He vowed that he would accompany the "outfit" as bootblack and camp cook to Captain Meredith, rather than suffer the fearful anxiety and anguish of mind, that a separation from the darling of his heart would cause him.

No sooner was this decided upon, the time being some four weeks previous to the anticipated departure of the Merediths from San Antonio, than Randal threw up the situation which he had held for some time at the quartermaster's office, and went into camp alone, on the San Antonio River, some miles below the city.

While there, he inured himself in every way to camp life, visiting the Granger Ranch daily, to assist in hitching up mules, and learn all that he could of those perverse and vicious members of the animal kingdom.

Learning that Old Rocky, a noted scout, was to guide her father to the Rio Nueces, Mollie sought an interview, with the former, on the first opportunity.

To him, she revealed her secret, and requested of him that he would visit Randal at his camp, assist him in disguising himself, and then volunteer to engage a driver for her father. This driver, of course, was to be Randal Rockwell.

All was arranged as Mollie proposed and planned.

This, therefore, will explain to the reader, the circumstances which formed the tie which we have seen bound together the beautiful girl and

her father's teamster; as well as their words, on the night in which they were surprised by the Apaches.

The fact was, that Captain Meredith, acute though he believed himself to be, was the only one in the party, who was ignorant of the real name and character of his teamster.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD ROCKY'S RUSE.

THE harrowing impressions of Old Rocky, when he detected the departure of a portion of the war-party to the back trail, may be imagined.

He had run a terrible risk, and induced the brave Tonkaway to share it with him, in an endeavor to prevent the Apaches from discovering the wagons; and now, it appeared, everything had been in vain.

The old scout was also greatly concerned in regard to his red pard, who he feared might be too reckless, and thus jeopardize his chance for escape.

He well knew the hatred of Turtle for the Apaches; and also that of the warriors of the Pecos for the red-man, who associated with, and aided the whites.

A terrible torture awaited either of them, should they be captured alive; but the old scout well knew that the Tonkaway would fight to the last, and to the death, unless numbers hurled themselves upon him. This, he feared, would be the case.

Every bound of his horse seemed to increase the furious anger and torturing concern of Old Rocky; the probable fact that he would be forced to abandon his well-tried steed, adding much to his rage, and thirst for revenge.

Not only these things were now working upon his mind, but the knowledge that the Indians were so near, and a realization that it would be more difficult for him to escape, situated as he was, than if a river flowed in front of him.

There was, as he was aware, no current to the Souse Lakes; the water being mirror-like, and stagnant, being also literally alive with alligators.

Were there a strong current, he could plunge in and be carried down-stream; diving, as he went over the bank, and swimming under the water to the opposite side. That is, if it were not too wide, and the ripple of his movements would not betray him.

These thoughts darted through his mind, as he urged his horse onward, dwelling last upon the deplorable fact that there seemed no chance to escape with the animal; when he suddenly gave vent to a loud laugh, that indicated the most intense relief and satisfaction.

"Dang my ole Texan heart, ef I didn't come ormighty nigh losin' my grip, es fur es my brain-box air considered, from hev'n a leetle tew much hellishness shoved onto me et onc't?"

"I'll play a back-actin' circus trick on ther condemned perrarer piruts, er I'm a p'ison per-varicator. Dang'd ef they're a-goin' ter dissect this ole raw-hide ripper, er kerral my critter either!"

"By bein' kinder keeful, an' takin' a chain-lightnin' spurt, we kin skin through es neat es a pin, ole hoss, barrin' gittin' nibbled ter death, by ther cussed alligators; which ain't down in ther book. Whoop-er-up, yer dang'd, or'nary greasy, painted, all-fired stinkin' skunks! I'll spile a few on yer, fer futur' fightin' er bu'st a tryin'."

"I'll chaw my own ear off, ef one on the lay-out 'mong ther mesquites gits hurted—dang'd ef I doesn't! Then look out, fer I'll be on a regular cyclone war-path. Take thet, yer smoky sons o' Satan!"

As Old Rocky shot out the last words, he took quick aim in his rear, pulled trigger, giving, as he did so, a yell of taunting exultation. One of the Apaches fell from his mustang to the plain.

Only one warrior remained to secure the steed, and take charge of the slain Apache; the others, with yells of fury, lashing their animals onward, but, as had been the case with the others in chase of Turtle, refraining from using their bows.

The old scout knew, that from his first appearance he had been recognized by the Apaches; and that they were determined, if possible, to take him alive. This too, notwithstanding their own losses.

As Old Rocky drew near the timber, he made ready for the movement, which would give him liberty or death.

When within two thousand yards of the verge of the somber woods, he again turned in his

saddle, and fired his trusty rifle; luckily wounding one of the leading warriors, from whose head flaunted two eagle-feathers. This caused confusion, and a slight halt of the savages. They were quickly urged on however, by the chief, who realized that the time had arrived to capture the noted scout; and that any delay now, would enable him to escape.

But no sooner had Old Rocky pulled trigger than he drove spurs deep, and his horse shot ahead, like an arrow from a bow; doubling the distance between him and his furious pursuers.

As he drove spurs, the old scout quickly made fast his rifle to the saddle-horn, and then, as his horse bounded into the timber, as soon as he knew that the animal was near the bank of the lake, he reversed his position, and sat facing the foe; at the same time, he jerked his heavy revolvers from their scabbards, and extended the weapons as high as he could reach above his head.

As this movement was accomplished, the horse bounded over the low bushes on the bank, and into the lake, with a sounding plunge, splashing the water ten feet in the air, both horse and man sinking beneath the surface; the two revolvers, however, remaining clear of the water.

But instantly the dripping form of Old Rocky popped upward, as did the head of his horse; the noble animal striking out for the opposite bank, cheered on by the old scout, who had taken the precaution to throw the bridle reins loosely over the horse's neck. Had it not been for the desperate fury and intense hatred which were stamped upon the face of the scout, he would have presented a most comical picture. As it was, with those deadly tubes leveled toward the screen of bushes on the north bank of the lake, submerged to the waist though he was, Old Rocky was truly tragic.

Luckily for the daring old Texan, the lake at this point was narrow. This he well knew, or he would not have made the attempt to cross it.

But a short distance had man and mustang proceeded, when, with terrific whoops, the Apache horde came crashing through the undergrowth, in a long line extending up and down the lake shore.

They were evidently resolved that their dreaded enemy, who had dispatched so many of their braves, should not now escape them. And well Old Rocky knew that it would have been impossible for him to have eluded the Pecos warriors, by dashing either up or down the lake shore.

When the Indians reached the fringe of low bushes bordering the bank, and discovered their expected captive gliding over the surface of the waters, they were at first astounded. His having plunged over the bank, his reversed position, and his threatening attitude, were each and all inexplicable.

This feeling, however, was but momentary. Soon a chorus of frantic, vengeful yells, and whoops of disappointment and fury rung over the waters, followed by a volley of arrows. These the old scout avoided by throwing himself forward upon the back of his horse.

Quickly recovering his upright position, he let fly, in succession, six shots from his revolvers, and had the satisfaction of seeing two braves fall dead, and others howl with agony; but, as if driven to perfect frenzy by this, as well as by the probabilities of the scout's escape, a half-dozen warriors lashed their horses over the bank, into the lake, holding their bows above their heads.

Fierce whoops of war, yells of encouragement and exultation, with howls of furious agony and rage, filled the night air. The moon had turned the waters into a seeming mass of liquid silver, above the surface of which the six maddened and eager braves glided, all fitting their arrows to their bow-strings.

Never did Apaches make a more foolish movement than did those who thus swam their mustangs after Old Rocky, for he was now near to the opposite bank and had in addition an advantage, which the Indians, in their mad haste, had failed to realize, even when his taunting laugh rung over the waters.

The pursuers had not passed over one-quarter of the distance from one side of the lake to the other, when the horse of Old Rocky clambered, panting and dripping, up the south bank and into the bushes, within the screen of which the old Texan had no sooner arrived than he quickly slid from his horse and gave the animal a sounding whack, which caused it to crash onward at a gallop through the undergrowth.

This done, the scout crept directly to the edge of the bank, and there crouched, in readi-

ness for business. He well knew that none except braves who were fresh on the war-path would have exposed themselves as had those who took to the water.

He expected to see these warriors turn back to the shore, regardless of his rather thin strategy; but he was agreeably disappointed, for on they came, lured by the belief that the Old Rocky was still on his fatigued horse, and now struggling up the lake shore through the bushes. Of this, indeed, they felt certain; for the animal was plainly heard by them.

The Apaches on the opposite bank still sat their mustangs, watching their fellow braves with eager interest, and encouraging them with vengeful whoops, when suddenly, from out the fringe of thick bushes, shot a flash, followed by a report that echoed, with thundering reverberations, through the leafy arches of the bottom timber and rolled up the lake.

The leading brave threw up his arms, and a horrible death howl burst from his throat.

"This was changed to a dread gurgling sound as he sunk beneath the waters.

A yell of most furious rage from the Apaches on the opposite bank was broken by another sounding report, then came another, and another, at such close range as to insure death at every pull of trigger. The old scout meant business.

Three more braves sunk into the calm waters of the lake to be devoured by alligators. Then, with yells of astonishment, terror and dread, the two survivors jerked the noses of their struggling mustangs in a half-circle and headed back to the north bank. They were too late, however.

The exultant laugh of Old Rocky, nearly drowned though it was by the outcries of rage and furious disappointment from their fellow-warriors, was heard by them, causing them to lean forward in apprehension of what might follow.

It was not long in coming.

Loud and piercing rung the Texas yell of the old scout, his war-cry being close followed by two more reports from his heavy revolvers, and nothing now remained above the surface of the lake, except the muzzles and ears of desperately swimming mustangs.

The six Apache braves were, doubtless, by this time, being crunched in the huge jaws of the hideous slimy saurians in the dark and muddy depths of the lake.

Nothing short of a regular vocal pandemonium ruled the opposite bank, the Apaches galloping hither and thither in a maddened mob, perfectly disheartened and demoralized at the wholesale slaughter that had been accomplished by but one foe, and he one whom they had expected before this to have bound hand and foot, and taken to the Rio Pecos, for the most fearful torture they could devise.

The old scout gave a chuckle of intense satisfaction and self-gratulation, patting his own head caressingly, as he muttered:

"Good boyee, Ole Rock! Yer salerwated ther red bellyuns purty slick, fer a fac'; tuck 'em in outen ther wet, or ruther, I sh'ud say, put 'em ter soak fer alligators ter hash.

"Now, I'll glide ter 'vestergate matters 'gard-in' ther Tonk. I hope he's made ther rifle; but ef he's gone over ther dewide, I swan I'll skute over ther drink ag'in, an' plug every red bellyun thar bees come nigh me, until I goes under—dog-goned ef I don't, every time!

"Dang my cats!" he exclaimed, in self-condemnation at the after-thought, "I plum furgut ther cap'n, an' ther kaliker-kivered female omen!

"Here goes! Tonk fust, an' then we'll whoop-er-ee fer ther mesquites; thet air ef my red pard hain't warbled his death-song."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAPTURE.

No event of importance occurred on the trail of our friends, from the time they had left San Antonio until we take up the record of their perils, commencing in the line of mesquites, between the Rio Frio and the Rio Nueces.

At first all had been delighted with the Tonkaway, who had joined the party at the Rio Medina, at the request of Old Rocky, the latter asserting with pride that his red pard "c'ud skupe in more ba'r on a trail than a dozen common perrarer perergrinators."

Little Ben, at first somewhat frightened at the war-painted brave, soon became very friendly with him, as also did Mollie, and Turtle repaid it by guarding the young lady with jealous care, on her own little expeditions in search of wild-flowers.

Captain Meredith, on leaving San Antonio,

had been voted a fool and madman, for forcing his family into such a dangerous region; and Old Rocky, as well as the Tonkaway, endeavored to dissuade him from venturing beyond the Frio. But here the captain's innate stubbornness came to the front. He swore he would go on where he could be sure of an undisputed title to his lands, and he repudiated all accounts of Indian depredations, asserting that he could "clean out" a common-sized war-party himself, and not half try.

As no Apaches had been known to raid for some months below Fort Clark, Old Rocky himself did not apprehend danger from that source; and the Souse Lakes, where Captain Meredith had decided to locate, were at a safe distance from Mexican bandits.

In fact, until the warriors of the Pecos were really in sight, none of the party had the least suspicions in regard to meeting hostile Indians.

The little son of Captain Meredith was a well-developed, handsome lad; and, during the trip, he had proved himself a good marksman, and brave as a lion.

He had a rifle that had been made expressly for him, with a navy revolver in close company, and a small-sized bowie-knife buckled about his waist.

As has been mentioned, little Ben, as well as his mother, had fallen asleep from fatigue, at the time of the alarm; and, until the return of the captain from his lookout, neither of them knew anything of the delay or the danger that menaced them.

The boy awakened quickly, and realizing that the wagon was going at terrific speed, supposed the team to be running away. Springing to the forward part of the wagon, he peered out, and saw James, as the teamster was called, lashing the mules, while the wagon was swaying like a boat in a storm.

He soon saw that something was wrong.

"What in the world is the matter, mother?" he asked.

"Oh, Benny, my child! We are pursued by Indians. We shall all be slain! Oh, why did we venture over the Frio?" cried the terror-stricken woman.

"Don't fret, mother," said the boy bravely, as he grasped his rifle; "we'll attend to the Indians. I reckon they won't get away with papa, and James, and Mollie, and me; to say nothing of Old Rocky and Turtle. By the way, I don't see either of our guides. Where are they, mother?"

"I don't know, darling, I am sure. I have seen neither them nor the Indians; and your father has given no explanation. Indeed, he has had no time. Oh, I feel very weak and ill!"

"Don't be frightened, mother. I'll not leave you, and I don't more than half believe there are any Indians after us. It is only a scare.

"But, I say, we are on the back track! That looks like business. There must be something in it. I'm afraid we have a hard night ahead of us; and the mules can't stand this sort of run long."

All this time the frantic mules were being lashed onward by James, or Randal Rockwell.

Captain Meredith, now bitterly reproaching himself for his stubbornness, was gazing to the rear in horrible expectation, his rifle clutched as in a vise, while he spurred madly on.

On the face of his beautiful daughter there was a firm determination, to brave the danger of which she had no true realization. That which most troubled her, was the thought that perhaps Randal might become desperate, desert the mules, and fly to defend her; thus incurring the anger of her father, and periling the life of her mother and brother. And indeed, it is probable that no man was ever before placed in so bewildering and anguished a position, as was her lover.

In this dire extremity, he regretted more than all, that he had been persuaded to assume a name and occupation so unbefitting him; but it was now too late for more than regrets.

He must play the game to the bitter end.

Thus, on and on, flew the mules, with snorts of pain, as the "black-snake" cracked about their flesh. Thus, on, until the terminus of the line of mesquites was reached, when "James" jerked the panting mules to a halt.

The moon now shone brightly, and the level plain in front, stretching as far as eye could reach, to the Rio Frio, afforded no shelter.

Once out upon this, they would be at the mercy of the Indians, who could easily surround them.

There had been, as yet, no indication of the Apaches; and, from this they had all gathered hope, except "James." The young man had

learned much of the red foe from Old Rocky, and he felt sure that the Indians were following them.

The question that now arose was, should they proceed toward the Rio Frio?

All were in favor of keeping on, even at a walk, except Captain Meredith. He ordered the wagon toward a denser portion of the mesquites, and began at once to throw out their effects.

He then insisted upon James placing the goods in the form of a circular barricade.

Mrs. Meredith was now completely prostrated.

Little Ben was rejoiced at a chance to show off. He loosened his pony, sprung into the saddle, and urged the steed to the side of the small clear space, in which the wagon had been halted.

Here, against the protestations of his sister, he appointed himself a vedette for the occasion.

The mules were left in harness; the forming of a barricade being thought the most important work, and the one to be at first accomplished.

Mollie now rode up to the wagon, and explained to her almost frantic mother, the absence of Old Rocky and Turtle; as also the fact that she herself had seen Apaches riding toward them.

In this way were our friends positioned; the captain and James hastily placing the goods in breast-work form, and the last bale being scarcely in its place, when the blood-curdling war-whoop its place, when the blood-curdling war-whoop close at hand, and from the opposite side of the wagon—a point that had been unguarded by the eye of any.

The same instant, the six mules, with plunges and snorts of fright, sprung in mad flight out from the mesquites, and over the open plain.

Then each one of the appalled party saw the deathlike face of Mrs. Meredith, as it sunk back from the aperture, caused by the upraised tilt.

On, at terrific speed, stampeded the mules, circling toward the Rio Nueces, beyond the line of mesquites, and to the east of them; while, although not an Indian was as yet to be seen, our friends knew, by the prancing and panting of steeds, that they were, even now, completely surrounded by the red foe.

Before they could fully realize the utterly bewildering horrors of their position, they were filled with the most torturing concern for poor Mrs. Meredith, so suddenly spirited from their midst.

Just then a flight of feathered arrows shot glinting in the moonlight, and the pony of Ben fell to the earth in a death-struggle, from which the astonished and grief-stricken boy found no little difficulty in extricating himself.

"James" sprung over the barricade with Mollie, whom he had jerked from her horse, in his arms, and an arrow projecting from his thigh; while, with a yell of consternation and terrible rage, Captain Meredith caught up his son, as the youth fired into the bushes to avenge the death of his pony and the fright of his mother, and bounded over into the circular barricade.

There they all crouched, with weapons in their hands at full cock, while the horses sprung away in affright, the cessation of their tramp soon proving that the Apaches had secured them.

"May God forgive me for bringing my loved ones into these fearful dangers!" cried out the agonized Captain Meredith, from his inmost soul.

Then came a piercing shriek from the young girl as a dozen paint-daubed, feather and trinket-bedizened forms sprung out suddenly from the mesquites, revealing themselves to the view of our hapless friends, and standing motionless and silent as so many statues.

At the same instant "James" yelled:

"Fire at their knees!"

Then, as the fingers pressed triggers, and the rifles of all blended as one—even that of little Ben—all saw that the order came opportunely; for the Apaches had dropped to earth, revealing themselves only to draw the fire of the whites.

Following the deafening report of the rifles, sounded dread death-howls, and as revolvers were quickly jerked from their scabbards, our friends discovered that every Indian had again disappeared, dragging the slain after them.

Their strategy had failed; but only to be succeeded by another move more certain.

Only one end was to be looked for, and it could not now be far off.

The ball was open, and the beautiful and

bright Mollie Meredith, her brave and faithful lover, her little brother and her father—all were now doubtless doomed.

And the mother, sick and terror-stricken, was now being whirled over the moonlit prairie by maddened mules, unconscious, it might be hoped, of her own fearful position or of the deadly peril of her darlings.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO THE BITTER END.

ABOVE and beyond all his present danger, from which there seemed no possible escape, the torturing anxiety of little Ben Meredith, on his mother's account, was the paramount feeling with the brave boy.

He resolved to escape, if such a thing were in any way possible, and to hasten in pursuit of his loved parent; who, he felt sure, would die from fright and anguish, when she realized fully her own and their terrible position.

Each of the besieged now faced one point of the compass, and prepared for the worst. The captain and Mollie well knew that more Indians than had shown themselves must be near at hand.

Thus they watched, ready for the first danger that should present itself, and mentally praying for help in this extremity of peril. For some moments, all was silent; a silence ominous as death itself.

Then, the tramp of animals up from the south, among the mesquites, heralded the approach of those who had not been able, from the fatigue of their mustangs, to keep in the advance line.

Full well the watchers knew that an assault of some kind would soon follow; and the boy reasoned that this was the chance of all chances, when the attention of the savages should be directed toward the new-comers. A small white cloud, for the moment passed before the face of the moon; then the youth grasped the hand of his sister, an act that seemed to her to be only in accord with the condition of affairs. Little did the young girl think that the grasp of her hand was a farewell; that her daring little brother had resolved to steal out from the barricade, and go to the rescue of his mother. But such was the case.

Stealthily the lad crawled over the bales, and along the sward gaining a position beyond the line of red foes, before the moon again burst forth in silvery brightness.

Filled with most terrible anxiety as the moments passed, and fearing that little Ben might curiously glance at other points of danger, and that some savage might crawl unseen to his side of the barricade, Mollie cast a sweeping glance to that point, and to her horror discovered that her brother was no longer in the inclosure.

"Father, father! Benny's gone!" she called out, in a half whisper, that sounded unnatural to herself.

Captain Meredith started, as though he had received an electric shock, as did "James," then he wailed:

"My God! My God! My boy, my poor little son! Wife and son both gone forever!"

"Brace up, and watch out, Captain Meredith!" advised the teamster, quickly, and in a firm voice.

"I believe little Ben has gone on a mission, a most desperate one, I admit; but I think, if he had not succeeded in passing the foe, we should have heard a tumult. In fact I am positive of it. He has gone in search of his mother, captain. He is a youth of a thousand!"

"Bless you for these words of cheer!" said the captain. "Your words are reasonable, and yet it seems hardly possible that the boy could make such a desperate attempt. But it would be little short of a miracle if he should escape."

"Mollie, I fear that you are all that is left me, and that neither of us will long require the care and love of each other. But let us die defending our lives, and avenging those we have lost!"

All grasped hands, and at this moment the captain started violently, crying out as he did so:

"Here they come, on the west side! Drop the red fiends, and don't miss a shot!"

The dull tramp of a small body of horses now sounded plainly, and soon after one and then another, through the small clear space, rode half a dozen braves, shooting arrow after arrow from beneath the necks of their animals.

Not one of the feathered shafts did injury, and the position of the foe so bewildered the whites that the latter did not fire a shot. Well

it was that they did not, as the bullets would have done no harm, and the loads were needed.

Just then a shriek from Mollie caused "James" and the captain to turn quickly and at once aim and pull trigger in an opposite direction, thereby preventing the capture or death of all, as four burly braves, with knives in hand, sprung from the mesquites on the east, and from the sward to the top of the barricade.

Three of them received bullets in their painted breasts, and with horrible death-howls fell back struggling in the agonies of death on the moonlit sward; but the fourth, unable from his great speed forward to turn and retreat, fell forward directly upon poor Mollie, hurling her to the earth.

Instantly "James" dropped his rifle and, drawing his knife, sprung upon the Apache, and they were locked in an embrace which must end in the death of one or both.

Fearing danger from the west, Captain Meredith was now forced to turn about, jerk his revolvers and guard both his own and the station of the teamster, the terrible howls of rage that broke forth from the Indians at the defeat of their plan and the death of their comrades causing a shudder to convulse his iron frame and the blood to curdle in his veins.

As the huge warrior rushed over the barricade against Mollie, the strength of the young girl, already so severely taxed, gave way, and she sunk senseless at her post, still clutching her rifle.

Never, perhaps, was a man placed in a more agonizing position than was the captain. He now found himself obliged to keep his head above the rampart, with both revolvers leveled, and to give constant sweeping glances on all sides; while his only and darling daughter lay senseless and, for aught he knew, stabbed to the heart by the Apache, who was now in deadly conflict with the teamster.

Over and over, struggling for the mastery, rolled "James" and the Apache brave, the sinews of both strained to the utmost, the eyes of each glaring into those of the other, neither having the power to twist his knife-hand free that he might give a fatal thrust. At last, by an almost superhuman effort, the young man forced the savage quickly to a standing position, at the same moment hurling his foe backward, bending him over the top of the barricade, thus wrenching his spine.

With a howl of agony, the brave released his hold on the wrist of his antagonist, and the flashing blade of the latter shot up and then down, through bone and flesh; bringing the death-yell, as the hot blood spurted up and over, in a red arch, breaking into crimson spray upon the green sward.

Hurling the still quivering corpse over the wall before him, "James" sunk panting to his knees by the side of Mollie, and placed his trembling hand upon her heart.

"Thank God!" broke in heartfelt tones, from Captain Meredith, as he saw the brave thrown over the barricade. Then as "James" knelt at the side of the unconscious girl, her father, seeing nothing strange in the young man's solicitude and deep interest, said in a hoarse voice:

"Don't tell me she is dead! For God's sake say she is spared to me, or I shall go mad!"

"Thank Heaven, she lives!" returned "James," with a deep sigh of relief as he breathed his gratitude.

"God bless you for the words!" exclaimed Captain Meredith. "Let the red demons come now. I am ready for them. It is a fight to the death, and against fearful odds; but we will not quail."

But this most unequal battle was destined soon to end.

The Apaches, maddened beyond endurance at their loss, and determined now to capture their foes, and appease the spirits of the slain, had conceived a plan to insure success, although fully aware that some of their number must undoubtedly lose their lives in the attempt.

For the first time since the attack the Indians knew the exact force of their foe—the wagon, when they had stampeded the mules, preventing them from observing the number of whites; they being also suspicious that the bales had hidden more men than they had seen bound over them.

Three braves were now ordered to cut a number of small mesquite trees, and at a given signal, to advance with the same in their front toward the barricade; the remainder making their way around to the eastward in a body prepared to bound quickly over the bales, and bind the whites.

All being ready, the signal was given, and

the mesquites, shaking and rustling in such a manner as to conceal a dozen warriors, were thrust along the ground toward the fort of bales.

At the very moment that the attention of the whites was drawn to this point, a dozen burly braves sprung in a moment over the intervening space, at the east of the whites and over the barricade. Not a yell burst from their lips, until they bounded upon the two appalled and dumfounded men.

A couple of revolver shots, a desperate struggle, mingled with groans of anguish and frantic rage, and the yell and whoop of the exultant savage; and then all was over.

Captain Meredith and "James" lay, bound hand and foot, and panting with exertion; their eyes filled with hopeless despair, and anguish unutterable.

Providential was it, that poor Mollie was now, through being senseless, spared from witnessing the struggle and capture; for she had suffered, and was doomed to suffer, mental agony, more than any one can imagine, without having this added to it.

The paint-daubed fiends flittered here and there in the moonlight; mustangs being quickly led into the opening, and laden with the goods of the whites.

The two men were bound upon mustangs also, and in a way that made it impossible for them to escape.

The animals were then led on one side, in a single line, and the chief of the party mounted the horse of Captain Meredith; a warrior placing the poor girl, still limp and senseless, in his arms.

These arrangements being made, the dead were also bound upon mustangs, and the war-party divided; a portion, headed by the chief, with his fair captive, pointing eastward, and the remainder, with the Captain and "James," starting south, through the mesquites, toward the Souse Lakes.

As Captain Meredith and Randal Rockwell saw Mollie, being borne away in this manner, in the arms of the hideous Apache chief, they groaned in deepest agony of soul; the Captain crying out, in his despair and anguish:

"Oh, my God! Hast Thou forsaken me?"

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT OTHERS THOUGHT.

It would be expecting too much of the sleepy little Alamo City, to suppose that it had not been wide awake to the state of affairs between the pretty daughter of Captain Meredith, and the handsome young clerk in the Quartermaster's Department.

To do them justice, they were thoroughly satisfied in their own minds as to the condition of things, even before Randal and Mollie had even begun to suspect themselves of anything more than a mutual friendliness; and for a considerable time previous to the encounter in the garden, to which reference has been made, and the outburst of parental indignation on the part of the old captain, upon whom the knowledge had come with the suddenness of a thunder-shock.

Many were the speculations, as to the turn which affairs were likely to take when the Merediths should leave San Antonio; the announcement of the captain's intention to emigrate having been made soon after the latter had recovered from his illness.

To some, who had watched the progress of events in the case of the youthful lovers, it would have been matter for no surprise, had the fair Miss Mollie been among the missing, on the very eve of their departure. Not a few were of the opinion that Uncle Sam would be minus an employee about the same time. Indeed the predictions were pretty openly expressed, though fortunately none of them reached the ears of the irate paternal, that, for once, the course of true love would run smoothly; and, this time, in an easterly, and not in a westerly direction, as Captain Meredith had arranged it with himself.

But, before the eventful day of the Meredith exodus, as we know, Randal Rockwell had resigned his situation, left the post, and gone, no one seemed to know whither; and stranger still, the one who was to have been—on the authority of universal conjecture—the companion of his flight, had not the slightest appearance of having donned the willow for a recreant lover. On the contrary, the pretty Mollie was the most jubilant of the party, when, following the course of empire, they took their way westward.

The citizens were disappointed. They would have been less, or more than human, had they not been.

All were ready to swear that the young lady had been completely "gone" on the gallant Government clerk; and consequently had a right to look for something more after the ordinary run of such matters. It was truly mystifying. The only solution possible, under the circumstances, was that the girl had used the privilege of her sex, and changed her mind.

But that was not like her—not in the least like any one's conception of the pretty Miss Meredith.

She was her father's daughter, most emphatically; was "chock-full of grit," and could never be scared or cowed into anything. And there was no appearance of either force having been brought to bear in the emergency.

Old Rocky, having become the confidant of both parties, the moment that Randal decided to begin his indefinite term of servitude for the Rachel of his heart, had more than one opportunity of conveying messages, and thus adding to the unmistakable flow of spirits which characterized the deportment of Mollie at this trying time, and so puzzled and scandalized the gossip-loving portion of the community.

"I tell yer, Randal," said the old scout, "ther leetle gal air ther ra-al Simon-pure, yer kin jist gamble on hit. Ter see how she manidges ther durn ole mule-head cap'n, throwin' ther san' inter his eyes without half-tryin', an' makin' him b'lieve she'd a heap ruther leave San Antone then not, air better'n ary play I hes sot through. Dang my cats ef I don't b'lieve Miss Mollie c'u'd make this trip on her own 'count perwidin' thar war ther obje' at ther eend o' hit, what she spects ter hev on ther trail! Thet's what keeps her spirits up now, a heap more'n ary' couridgement thar this ole perrarer peregrinator g'ins her.

"An' thar's Marm Meredith. Dog'd ef the ole cap'n wouldn't hev ter plant her some'rs on Powder House Hill fore he sets out on this hyer trail, ef 'twarn't fer ther way Miss Mollie kinder chirks up the old 'oman! She's woth ther hull kit an' caboodle, an' more tew; but yer know thet, I reckon, without my tellin' yer."

"I am decidedly of that opinion, friend Rocky," was the young man's reply; "so you think that Captain Meredith is not likely to suspect his daughter of any lingering regard for me, and therefore to be on the lookout for plots and conspiracies?"

"It would be awkward if, in any way, he should become suspicious, and in that way penetrate my disguise."

"He's 'bout es likely ter turn durn fool in thet direction, es he air ter try an' git ter Heaven, 'stead o' ther Newersis. An' I don't opine thet ther obsternit ole pomposity hes sich a idee. No, pard; yer kin rest easy on thet, 'sides which I doesn't b'lieve he'd know yer in thet rig ef he war s'archin' fer yer."

"Dog-goned ef I b'lieve Mollie herself'll be willin' ter recog' yer! Hit's durn lucky yer hes gut me 'long ter 'denterfy yer."

Randal Rockwell was satisfied; and, indeed, the disguise in which he had gotten himself for the character of teamster was one well calculated to deceive any who had known the young man on the streets and plazas of the Alamo City. His weakness had been, if anything, in the direction of attaching an undue importance to the proverb—"The tailor makes the man."

But even in his masquerade, there was that in "James," the teamster engaged by Old Rocky for Captain Meredith, that could not fail to attract the susceptible female eye.

It was this, so impossible to conceal in any disguise, that had first pleased the senses, and then won the heart of Mollie Meredith.

Frank and boyish, though Randal was, he was yet noble and chivalrous, as well as imperially commanding, in his manner. There was that in his very presence which seemed to give strength, and security, and restfulness to the young girl, each time that she had found herself in his company.

Many a time had Mollie, as she walked up and down the gardens around her father's mansion, been conscious, though without in the least being able to analyze or explain the feeling, that another and a balmier, more bracing atmosphere surrounded her; that a new and exquisite element had been suddenly transfused into her being.

She realized that strangely sweet, and sweetly solemn thoughts—indistinct and yet delicious—were at such times engrossing her. But she did not—for the experience was new—feel that it was the fateful linking that unites soul with soul, for good or ill; the magic touch that seals

the girlish heart, and opens the portal to the fairest inheritance short of Paradise that feet can tread upon, the heritage of love!

And to him, Randal Rockwell, sitting at his office desk, or walking with firm and rapid strides over the *adobe* pavements, there was no such thing as unriveting his thoughts from the fair and spirited young face, with its sweet and soulful eyes, and its framework of gorgeous sunny hair; the perfect realization of the ideal he had cherished from his boyhood, as the one and only type of womanly beauty and loveliness. And now, in the camp of the scouts, waiting anxiously for the time of their departure, when he could once more feast his hungry eyes upon her beauty, even at a distance, a strange and tender yearning filled his very soul, as he remembered the tones of her voice, and the glance of her eyes.

"I shall see her soon," he would say to himself, over and over again; "and yet it seems a long while to wait. I ought to be patient however when she is so brave, and bright, and cheerful, as Old Rocky describes. If it were possible to have any doubts of the depth and the sincerity of her love for me, surely that ought to convince me."

"And yet, how I hate to be compelled to use this deception, even with such a man as Captain Meredith. At best, when he discovers it, I shall be made to appear in a boyish and romantic character, by no means the one to win the captain's favor, and one which I despise myself."

"I could almost wish that there were danger in this expedition—or at least, a spice more of adventure than is likely to turn up between here and the Frio—and then one might have a chance to show what he is made of."

"Yes, Mollie darling," he said, speaking as if the young girl was before him: "I catch myself every now and then, wishing for a slight show of Indian warfare, that I might prove my devotion, and show your father that I am not altogether unworthy of you!"

Little did Randal Rockwell think, how bitterly and fervently he would recall that rash prayer; when he would wish that his tongue had been blistered before it was uttered, if so be the wild wish had hastened the catastrophe that was awaiting them!

When Martin Meredith made up his mind to anything, the prospect of changing it by anything in the shape of argument, was about as feasible as that of changing the current of the Gulf Stream. His wife had learned this fact early in the prosperous and palmy days that had followed their marriage; and whatever inclination, she might once have had to row against the current, continuous ill-health had pretty thoroughly eradicated.

His daughter had also, at quite an early age, fully appreciated this by no means amiable trait in the character of the father, whom she nevertheless fondly loved; and, for this reason, wasted few words with him on the subject of Randal Rockwell, and fewer still on what nearly every one deemed his mad project of taking his family, and the wreck of his fortune, into the wilds.

In the former case, Mollie was wisely disposed to trust to strategy; in the latter, to rest in the firm conviction, which youth is but seldom possessed of, that time sets all things right.

Captain Meredith, as we have seen, was making this second move of his life in a somewhat misanthropic spirit; and it was hardly to be wondered at that it was so. Had the venture included none besides himself, it would have mattered little; but the captain was essentially a selfish as well as an obstinate man, and rarely thought of anything but his own will and pleasure. Though much might have been said, by his neighbors in San Antonio, in extenuation of his present step, had they seen fit to say it—which they did not—there was not a shadow of excuse for the present and future danger to which he was exposing his wife and children.

So thought every one, and Old Rocky, who had undertaken to act as their guide, was no exception to the rule. He did not, however, venture so to express himself to his employer. The old scout well knew that the only possible effect such an expostulation would have, would be the very probable release of himself from his contract, and the consequent handing over of the Meredith household to the guidance of some one much less experienced than himself; thereby still more fearfully jeopardizing their lives.

But though Old Rocky, after the first interview with the captain, thus prudently kept silence even from good words, he was not equally reticent when by himself; or, what was much the same thing, when his only companion was his red pard, Turtle the Tonkaway.

"Dog my cats!" he exclaimed. "Ef this hyer ain't ther maddest freak what ary human ouden a fool asylum ever struck. Ter listen at ther way ther dog-goned ole stuffed mule spits out in thet 'don't keer a durn fer nobuddy's 'pinion' way o' his'n, air 'nough ter make a man strike his mammy-in law!"

"I hes allers see'd thet when a man don't know 'nough ter git in shelter from a 'norther,' he air liarble ter think he's swaller'd ther tree o' knowledge, trunk, ruts, an' branches. An' thet air 'bout whar ther ole cap'n stan's. What air yer 'pinion, Tenk?"

"Big White Chief, heap fool," said Turtle, in his usual conclusive and laconic manner.

"Ye're mos' gin'rally boun' ter be purty clear in what yer opines, Tenk; an' I'll be dog-goned ef yer hesn't 'spressed bit now es well es I c'u'd myself, an' with a heap less chin music."

"What puzzles me air whar ther leetle gal an' ther boy come by ther boss sense. I hes see'd an' hed confabs wi' them both. Ole Marm Meredith hain't gut more'n ther stock o' wits she war borned with, 'peariently; though I'm sorry fer her, 'kase she don't seem ter hev stren'th 'nough ter more'n draw breathe. So whar ther brains was 'herited from, air more'n I kin tell myself."

"Ther ole cap'n mought et a pinch, hev savy 'nough ter keep him ouden ther fire; though he hesn't ter show him a heap woss fire then ary one this side o' Tophit, what he's boun' ter head fer now, on a cyclone stompede, once he gits started. But Miss Mollie, bless her purty face! c'u'd spar' him some, an' hev a better show left fer gittin' through the worl' comfor'ble then most o' the caliker-kivered female 'omans yer kin fine in civerlize."

"Ther boy, tew, what I hes see'd of him, air a pressed brick—dog'd ef he ain't!—an' I 'spects ter freeze ter ther youngster right smart on this hyer trail, an' mebbe so I'arn him somethin' more'n thet ole swell-head daddy o' his'n kin, seein' he never knowed it hisself."

The views of Old Rocky were pretty generally shared in by those whose acquaintance with Captain Meredith had long antedated that of the scout.

At the same time, there was not the same generous sympathy expressed for the wife and children, whom, all agreed, he was insanely carrying into great peril. Mrs. Meredith had been too much of an invalid to keep up much of a social intercourse with those whom her husband's haughty exclusiveness was sufficient to repel; and she, in consequence, was credited with sharing the captain's feelings.

While the pretty Mollie, guarded most jealously by her father, had seen naught to strike her youthful fancy until the manly form of Randal Rockwell met her gaze; and with him filling eye and heart, all else was eclipsed. Hence, the popularity of our heroine, in spite of her beauty and loveliness of character was not at flood-tide in San Antonio.

Added to this, there was the strange and unaccountable cheerfulness and vivacity of the maiden, following the mysterious disappearance of the man whom, it was well known, she had loved.

It was shameful—very!

Not that these charitable and kindly souls cared a picayune for the missing quartermaster's clerk, or how much he might be suffering in mind or body; but it was too provoking to have their predictions so completely falsified—to have Mollie act so different from what was proper, and conventional, and fashionable, on such trying occasions.

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN TRIP.

"WA-AL," said Old Rocky, in soliloquy, after his wonderful escape from the Apaches, which has been described; pausing and tearing off a quid of tobacco, which, to his satisfaction; he saw had escaped a wetting in the lake:

"Wa-al, I reckon ther ruserlanermous cusses'll kinder conclude that I'm ther boss wile-cat o' ther Rockies arter this! They'll git 'quainted with my 'kill-nigger,' when he spits lead at 'em a few times more; an' I reckon I'll show 'em afore I'm done, thet I'm a boss dissector o' 'Pache 'natermey."

"I've hed a right smart many o' gunnin' expedishes ag'in' ther copper-colored sons o' Satan, an' ther breech o' 'kill-nigger' air tortur'd, on ther scarifyin' plan, wi' notches; but thar's a heap more ter be gashed ouden hit ef I kin keep ther run o' them in my brain-box. Things hes bin kep' a hummin' so peart since I diskivered ther greasy-painted skunks, thet I hain't hed a show ter take a long breathe, er scrouge in a chaw o' terbac' till now. Ther cusses air chuck full o' p'ison, he-mad 'bout now, an' ef ther Tonk hev laid out some on 'em ter dry, they'll be wusser an' wusser."

"I reckons thar war 'bout fifteen, what levanted

on ther back trail, an' hit does 'pear es though ther cap'n an' his lay-out c'u'd stan' 'em off ontel we-'uns skutes in, an' j'ines 'em. I'm a-bettin' heavy ther Randal air li'ble ter pan out a Simon-pure fighter, from ther word, go; an' ef he doesn't show a power o' sand in pectertin' ther leetle gal he doesn't des-serve her.

"Ther ole cap'n air so ormighty full o' self-con-sait an' mulishness, thet hit's a tough job ter find a soft spot in him. This hyer trip'll scrape some o' ther consait outen him, I reckon; ef hit doesn't gi'n him a ormighty big 'pinion' gardin' his mule-whacker. Ef I war Randal, I'd t'ar off my false whiskers, ther fust fight, an' come out squar' Simon-pure Rock-well.

"Hal ha! I reckon thet 'u'd make Joe Booth laugh right smart. I tuck ter Rockwell fust off, 'cos his name war some like my cog'; an' I likes him better an' better every day I sops corn-pone inter ther same fryin'-pan with him.

"Fac' air, I likes ther hull outfit. I'm sorry fer Marm Meredith, fer she hain't gut es much vim es a soakin'-wet buckskin. Reckon she'll skip outen this worl' on ther fly soon enough, without ther reds givin' her a boost. But ther gal—wa-al, I sw'ar she's a angel every inch, an' I'd fight like fourteen hundred panther-cats afore I'd see ther reds cause a wobble o' her eye-winkers.

"Thet Ben, too, air a young rooster that's gut sand enough fer two full-grow'd humans. But, dang hit, ther more I thinks o' them, the more I opines thet somethin's wrong; an' I'm needin' ther Tonk likewise. He's a rip-snorter—Tonk air—an' he don't 'low no 'Pache ter twitch his tail-feathers. Ya-as, sir-ree! He's a full grow'd, ontamed tiger-cat, when he's riled.

"G'long, ole hoss! Hyer we bees, on a camp-meetin' crawl, when we'd orter be skutin' on a blue streak. I knows yer is feelin' kinder 'doesn't-keer-a-dang,' but yer'll git plenty o' wile rye an' mesquite pickin's, arter this hyer circus air over.

"Thar's es purty a piece o' caliker es ever skipped ther dew from perrarer flowers, a sick 'oman, a leetle boy, a squar' an' white young gent, an' a dang ole stubborn, cross-grained fool—all on 'em, I reckon, starin' thar eyes outen thar heads ter git a gaze et us, er git skuped in by ther red hellyuns, one er t'other.

"Levant's ther word! Skip huffs lively, an' we'll soon run ag'in' ther Tonk, I reckon!"

As the old scout brought his soliloquy to an end, urging his horse as he spoke the last words, the animal made a sudden halt near a dark thicket, gaz-ing into the bushes, and giving a low whinny.

This was followed by a snake-like hiss, a signal that caused the old scout to return his rifle to its former position, and exclaim with relief:

"Dog my cats! Tonk, old pard, break bush, an' show yer beautiful pictur'!"

Turtle was at his side in a moment, saying briefly:

"My white brother is welcome."

"Dang my ole Texas heart, Tonk! Hit's good fer sore eyes ter git a squar' peep et yer. Reckon yer play'd ther same sort o' game I did?"

"Jump in tree from mustang," was the reply.

"Mustang run, then fall in wash-out. Apache no see Turtle in tree—no see mustang in wash-out. Turtle lasso Apache. Get scalp, see"—here he pointed to the gory trophies—"then crawl in bushes. Find wash-out. Go down. Want drink. Then find mustang. Turtle heap glad. Go up wash-out. Lasso one more Apache; one more scalp. Then heap much yell; heap howl. Apache ride from lake. See braves gone on long dark trail. Turtle he jump on mustang. Sound war-cry. Turtle here."

"Dang'd ef yer ain't a hard-pressed, full-baked, straight up an' squar' plum-center brick. Tonk! Shake! We-'uns hes sarcumvented ther bellyuns all roun'."

"Come on! We'll make a break on my back trail. I sunk six sculpers in ther drink, fer allergator-bait, an' drapped a couple on ther no'th bank, I reckon."

"Heap bad," asserted the Tonkaway.

"Ya-as, hit war a leetle tew bad, an' not 'zactly squar'. Tonk, fer I know yer 'ludes ter losin' thar ha'r. But thar's a heffy crap ter gather till yit, layin' roun' permisc'us-like. We-'uns kin glide easy ter ther south eend o' this hyer drink, wade over, whar hit kinder shakes paws wi' ther nex' an' skute over ther perrarer fur 'nough east ter make ther no'th part o' ther mesquites afore ther skunks kin cut us off."

The two pards whirled their horses, and proceeded down the south side of the lake to the eastward, their course leading them past the point where the old scout had landed.

A few rods below, they both halted near the bank of the lake, where they gazed over the silvery waters that covered the hideous forms of the six victims of Old Rocky.

Listening intently, a low hum, as of many warriors conversing, sounded faintly in their ears; and they could see the glow and flame of camp-fires amid the undergrowth, with occasionally a dark form of some Apache flitting before them.

"Ther condemned cusses air fillin' thar bellies, an' grazin' thar nags," said the old scout. "They're bracin' up fer more devilmint, while we-'uns hes gut ter keep on ther glide. They're a-goin' ter go b'ilin' arter our ha'r, afore they p'int's Pecos-way!"

"Find Turtle trail. Find Old Rocky trail, when sun come," said the Tonkaway, decidedly.

"Hit won't do 'em much good by thet time. All I want air ter git a show ter skute ter ther mesquites, without ther kiotes gittin' a peep at us."

"Apache in tree. See over plain. Moon shine bright like sun," asserted the Tonkaway.

"Reckon they're on the lookout es much ter git a sight o' the'r pards what levanted on ther back

trail es anything. But what made 'em think o' goin' back ter ther mesquites kinder gits me, Tonk."

"Apache cunning like fox. Think great scout got white friends in mesquites," said Turtle.

"Ya-as, I opine so. But why didn't they lunge right in, some on 'em, et ther start?"

"Too much heap mad to think. See Turtle. See Old Rocky. Want scalps. Bimeby head of chief get clear. Send braves back."

"Thet's 'bout ther sugar on hit, I reckon," agreed the scout. "But we-'uns can't make a ha'r, hyer-a-ways. Come! Levant's ther word."

Both proceeded together for half a mile, and then, at a narrow creek-like channel that was shallow, the dividing point between two lakes, they crossed into the north timber, making their way through it to-ward the plain, over which they must pass in order to reach the mesquites.

Once there, they halted and gazed out over the broad and moonlit vista—the open northern plain.

To the west, nearly a mile away, was the Apache encampment, while far to the northwest was a dark line on the plain, the southernmost por-tion of the mesquites, from which they had galloped in the mad race for life, to prevent their friends from being discovered and butchered.

To reach that point they must take a course north-west, over the open prairie, in full view of any Apache sentinel who might be, or probably was, posted in the tall trees on the verge of the lake-timber. Both had instinctively faced directly west-ward, along the line of timber toward the point of danger—the Apache camp—as they reached their point of observation. They then swept the plain toward the mesquites, over the course of their recent race, leaving the plain directly ahead and to the eastward to be viewed last, as nothing of interest or danger was expected from that quarter.

But as the Tonkaway shot a quick glance north and then northeast, he broke out with this ejaculation:

"Waugh!"

This, in as much astonishment as an Indian can manifest.

The old scout gazed quickly in the direction indi-cated by the pointed finger of his red pard, ex-claiming:

"Jumpin' Gee-hoss-iphath! Dang my cats, ef thar ain't ther waggun skutin' over ther perrarer et stompede speed! What in thunderation's up now?"

"B'ile me down inter a Piute pappoose, ef ther mules ain't on ther wile stompede! Thar ain't no driver, nor ary a human thet air ter be see'd in ther hull outfit. Thet looks kinder bilious."

"Tonk, I reckon ther kaliker an' all air gobbled up slick an' clean—but why ther reds hes 'lowed ther mules ter go on ther whiz, 'pears dang'd pecul'ar. Pard, I shell go plumb crazy ef thar all tuck ter tor-tur', speshly ther leetle gal."

"Dang my cats! I'm gittin' b'ilin' hot, chuck full o' p'ison indig', an' somethin's got ter drap frequent an' often, er I'll bu'st, dead sure."

"What's ter be did, ole pard? Spit her out, fer my ha'r's a-crawlin' like snakes, ter think o' ther sick 'oman, an' ther leetle boy, an' thet angel, Mollie, bein' scooped in by ther cussed, ornary, greasy-skinned piruts o' the plains!"

"Look!" returned the Tonkaway, pointing to the north. "Little Ben, he rides fast fer 'wheel-lodge.' Apache no got young brave boy."

"Wa-al, I sw'ar! Dang'd ef yer ain't kerrect ag'in! Thet air leetle Ben hisself, er I'll chaw bugs fer grub fer ther nex' six moons."

"Ag'in I axes, what in thunderation's up? Things air gittin' mixeded and mixeded, an' I'm gittin' off my kerbase wi' ther chap'ell-like tangle. I doesn't tumble ter this hyer thing 'zac'ly. Ther question air, who's in ther waggun, an' whar's ther t'others what belongs ter ther outfit?"

"No time for council-talk. No time smoke pipe," asserted the Tonkaway laconically; slapping his hand on the shoulder of his white pard, and pointing west along the line of timber.

Again he spoke:

"Look!"

"Jumpin' gee-hoss-iphath! Jerusalem an' Jerry-co counted in! Levant air ther word! Biz, heffy biz air ahead ag'in. Leetle Ben must be saved, er we-'uns 'll die a-tryin'!"

The sight to which Turtle had drawn the old scout's attention, was a half-dozen Apache braves, in the act of lashing their mustangs from the camp and timber, up the lake, and heading northeast; evident-ly with the view of intercepting the fast-flying wagon, and the brave youth whom they saw riding rapidly to overtake it.

CHAPTER XI.

"WAIT FOR THE WAGON."

It did not need more than one glance to convince Old Rocky and Turtle that there was no necessity for them to show themselves upon the open prairie; for the wagon, if the affrighted mules did not swerve from their course, would reach the timber of the lower lake before the Indians, or even little Ben, could overtake it.

Doubtless the Apaches believed the scouts to be still on the opposite side of the chain of lakes, or such a small force would not have been sent after the wagon and boy.

The few in number also proved that the savages apprehended no danger from the wagon, believing fully that there was no one in it; for, if so, why were the mules dashing unguided at such speed?

The scouts had no fears in regard to the mules keeping straight ahead; for they well knew that the animals must be frantic with thirst, and could scent the waters of the lake.

Both the Tonkaway and Old Rocky urged their horses through the wood, keeping at such a short distance from the margin that they could dash out

at any time. Neither of them spoke. An exultant look from one to the other, showed that each real-ized that he had now an opening to further avenge himself and his friends upon his red foe. They felt, too, that it was called for.

Sure were they, that the captain and his family had been attacked, and either killed or taken prisoners. The boy had evidently escaped, yet his presence on the plain was a mystery to them.

Why he should be pursuing the apparently empty wagon, was a question which puzzled the two men greatly. It could hardly have been that the Indians had appropriated the goods of the captain; for they would, in that case, have burned the wagon, and placed the mules with the plunder. Such animals were greatly coveted by the red-men, and this it was that caused the presence of the team to be so unaccountable to Old Rocky and his pard.

Nearer and nearer came the frantic mules, and the old scout burst forth in emphatic ejaculations of admiration, as little Ben spurred and lashed his horse onward; although the boy must have known that the Apaches were close behind him.

"Heap brave. Young warrior make good scout," was Turtle's decision, as the boy was seen to jerk his little rifle from the gun-holder at his saddle-horn, and dash on, holding the weapon ready, for instant use.

"Dang'd ef thet ain't ther purtiest sight I've see'd for a month o' Fo'th o' Julys!" exclaimed Old Rocky, in admiration and pride. "Why, he doesn't 'pear ter keer no more fer ther 'Pache ha'r-ta-rers than ef they war so many san'-fleas. But every-thing 'pears mixed. Thar ain't no driver. Ther waggun's bin unloaded, an' thar ain't a human in sight aboard. Dang my cats! I b'lieve all on 'em must ha' crawled inter a hole, an' pulled ther goods in a-top, 'lowin' ther mules ter skute, an' look out fer thei'selves."

"Scrouge up peart, Tonk! Ther ball air 'bout ter open. Choose yer red-meat kiotes, an' sashay 'em inter kingdom come on ther whiz, afore they draps outen leetle Ben. We-'uns 'll git thar afore ther wag-gun strikes inter ther timmer."

The wagon was now but a short distance from the dark shades, and the scouts were able to calculate upon the exact point at which the mules would en-ter; the animals seeming to know by instinct that the nearest place to water was down a gradual shelving hollow, which was free from trees, nothing but rank weeds covering its sides and bed. This offered easy access, as far as could be seen, from the edge of the timber to the lake; although possibly, there might be a high bank to descend, to reach the water.

Be that as it might, the scouts knew that the mules would stop at nothing, and that the team would dash at once over the bank, dragging the wagon after them. Crossing, therefore, the break in the towering timber, Turtle and Old Rocky, with rifles ready, sat their horses; but concealed from view, for they did not wish to frighten the mules, as the animals dashed up. They were prepared, how-ever, for business; having seen that the Apaches were now near at hand, lashing their mustangs furiously, in order that they might intercept the team and boy, before they could reach the shelter of the timber.

Little Ben was, by this time, not ten rods behind the vehicle; and it was with added surprise that the scouts discovered that he was riding the horse of his sister Mollie.

The Apaches, when they saw that both the boy and team would reach the timber before they could cut them off, gave vent to their rage in fierce yells; then, dashing on, they hoped to terrify the boy in that manner, and cause him to halt. But the spite-ful flash of fire from the boy's rifle, followed by a yell of agony, proved that Ben was far from being terrified as yet.

Old Rocky could hardly repress a cry of admir-ation, and both he and Turtle would have been greatly relieved, could they, without changing their plans, have revealed themselves. But this was im-possible, without being observed by the Apaches, who halted not for their wounded comrade, but galloped on, at headlong speed, in the pursuit.

The six snorting mules now dashed, with the wagon, down the shelving hollow, followed by the boy, his revolver in hand, and his face pale as death.

As he shot past the hiding-place of his friends, a volley of arrows cut the air over his head, and the brave lad yelled, in a voice that was painful to hear.

"Mother! O-o-o-oh mother! Jump for your life! There's death ahead!"

"Great Crockett!" cried Old Rocky, in the depth of his surprise and dread; "Marm Meredith's in ther waggun, Tonk! Charge ther condemned kiotes! Wipe 'em out clean on ther jump, an' cut off ther mules from ther drink!"

Before the orders of the scout had well been given, Turtle and himself had broken from their covert; and then followed two sounding reports in quick suc-cession, from their rifles.

With horrid howls, two braves fell from their mus-tangs; and then—flash, flash! bang, bang! went the revolvers of the scouts, at close quarters.

The Apaches were all either dead or rendered hors du combat, before they recovered from their paralyzing astonishment at seeing the pair of invin-cibles, who had slain so many of their comrades, and escaped their vengeance in so miraculous a man-ner.

The fight, this time, was all on one side, and was quickly over. Then Turtle and Old Rocky plunged down on the track of the wagon, as they shouted and yelled to little Ben.

On and on, beneath the dark shades, the two men

dashed; filled with concern, yet hearing no sound but that which was caused by their steeds.

At length they discovered the white tilt of the wagon, which they saw was below them, in the lake, and surrounded by the silvery waters; the mules being now hidden from view by the arch of canvas. Between the shore and the wagon, the scouts saw the horse that Ben had ridden. The animal was drinking, with eager avidity, its muzzle buried to the eyes in the water; but the boy was not in the saddle.

Down to the water's edge they hastened, relieved at finding there had been no trouble in the descent, which was easy; when a clear, firm voice of command rung in their ears, in boyish tones:

"Halt where you are, men, or I'll shoot! What are you—white, red, yellow, or black? Put a hand on weapon, and I'll spill your flapjacks!"

The listeners well knew, from the tones, that the youth had found his mother all right; and Old Rocky gave a horse-laugh in reply, as he cried:

"Put up yer shooter, leetle pard, an' 'low we-uns ter hev a shake o' yer paw!"

"I was almost surd it was you," said the boy, quickly, "and it's lucky you dropped down this way or mother and I would have been in a tight place, with those reds after us."

"How's Marm Meredith, an' how in thunderation come yer hyer without Randal ter drive? Whar's he an' Miss Mollie, an' yer daddy? Things 'pears ter be sorter mixed, an' we-uns 'll hev ter skute outen this lively, er git our heads skinned."

At this moment Mrs. Meredith placed her death-like face by that of her son, at the rear of the wagon-tilt, in the circular opening.

"Can it be that we are still in danger, Mr. Rocky?" she asked. "And you, Turtle—oh, I am so much relieved to see you. My boy came to me when I looked for death at each moment."

"What I have suffered since I recovered my senses no human being can imagine, and now you say that there is yet danger."

"Alas! I fear that my husband and poor Mollie have been killed. Benny will tell you all. I am in a most wretched state of mind and body."

"Talk quick, Len," said the old scout. "Ther kiotes heerd our shooters, an' they'll come a-hummin' arter us."

The lad gave in detail the events of the evening and night until his own flight from the mesquites.

During the recital the scouts listened intently, and as the boy finished, Turtle pointed upward, saying:

"Great Spirit send cloud. Hide wagon. Hide Turtle. Hide great scout. Hide Benny. It is good. Mules walk back to mesquites. Make no noise."

"Hold on ter my nag, Tonk," exclaimed Old Rocky, "an' I'll civerlize ther mules, an' hump 'em up an' through ther timmer. We'll all be ready ter skute by ther time ther moon draws ther blanket over her face."

Soon the mules were started, the Tonkaway proceeding ahead with the horse that Ben had ridden, and Old Rocky's animal in the lead.

The two animals were secured to the back of the wagon, just as a party of Apaches dashed from the timber to the westward, and headed toward the point whence the rifle-shots had sounded. But they could see neither the wagon nor Turtle; for, with monotonous war-song, the Tonkaway was now tearing off the scalps of the slain, the cloud over the moon concealing him.

Old Rocky had torn off the white wagon-tilt, which might have betrayed them, and, as the moon disappeared, all proceeded over the plain, in the direction of the mesquites. Little Ben, at the old scout's suggestion, had retired to the wagon with his mother, and was now sleeping—a rest well earned, and it may be hoped, well enjoyed.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE BACK TRAIL.

OLD ROCKY and Turtle felt greatly relieved and thankful, that they had been the means of saving Mrs. Meredith and her son from death; but both were satisfied in their minds that the missing members of the party had been either killed outright, or what was worse, taken captive.

Both felt great exultation at having again defeated the Apaches, and in having thus outwitted them in taking the wagon away from their very noses. They knew that when the Indians discovered their dead, and ascertained that the corpses had been scalped, they would be frantic, for they would know by the left ear of each being severed—Turtle's mark—that the detested Tonkaway had taken the trophies.

Nearly a score of the original war party had been slain by the two scouts; and the Apaches would consequently remain in the vicinity as long as there was any chance to secure captives, to convey back to the Pecos to appease by their torture the squaws of the slain.

They felt assured now, that the party which had attacked Captain Meredith would, if possible, secure the whole "out-fit" as captives. There was comfort, though slight, in this.

The mules now moved so languidly over the plain that Old Rocky, having noticed the large quantity of water which they drank in their heated state, felt sure that they would die; or at least be useless for a long time, if not kept on the move. So he remarked to Turtle:

"I 'lows, pard, that a mule air slapped tergeter ter keep. They're the dang'dest toughest animiles ever let loose on this hyer big ball o' dirt; but I sw'ar when a mule sucks in twicet es much drink es his skin kin hold, somethin's gut ter bu'st!"

"I'm opinin', Tonk, that we air on ther wrong trail ter git ther folkses 'way from ther red heathun. I'm a-bettin' 'kill-nigger' ag'in a pop-gun, ther

ther kiotes hes gobbled ther cap'n, an' Randal, an' ther purty leetle gal; an' ef they hes, I'm dead sure an' sartin they skated et onc't, fer thar pards et ther lakes yunder."

"Ther more I'm a rollin' hit 'roun' in my brain-box, ther more sartain I am that I orter laid low in ther bush, an' 'lowed Marm Meredith an' Ben ter levant toward civerlize with ther waggun. I'm of ther 'pinion that we'd better, soon es we strikes ther mesquites, wake ther boy up, an' start him off fer ther Frio, with ther outfit an' his marm."

"What sort o' idees air crawlin' 'roun' under yer eagle-feathers, Tonk? Shove 'em out, ole pard!"

"When get to mesquites, mebbe so see Apaches. Mebbe so see old White Chief, Randal, Mollie, all tie on horse for torture. Go to lake, then Turtle he follow trail. See what do. Heap talk no good on war-path."

"Dang'd ef yer doesn't say a heap o' mean in a few words, Tonk! Ye're sensible es usual, ole pard; ye're ther boss o' ther boss trailer o' Texas; an' I doesn't want no better record than yours, I sw'ar!"

"Less see; ther boyee an' ther waggun come on ther hum since startin' an' when Ben lef' they war holdin' thar persish. Reckon ye're kerreet, Tonk."

"I swan I b'lieve yer kin see through ther hull biz, an' c'u'd tell ter ther minut, when they'd 'rove et ther south pint o' ther mesquites. Thar's whar we'll glide in an' lay fer 'em; though I doesn't much reckon thar'll be a show ter rush in, an' snatch 'em bald-headed. But we kin pick up p'int, an' we'll know dead sure what's bin did."

"Ef ther scariyers starts up ther Nueces with 'em, I reckon we-uns kin foller. I'll skin through ter ther Pecos, afore they shill twist a ha'r o' ther leetle gal's head, er hash Randal. Es ter ther cap'n, he's tougher 'n a ole raw-hide, an' stubborner 'n a Mex' mule, an' I wouldn't mind much ef ther 'Paches tuck a leetle o' ther stiffenin' outen him. Hilt 'ud make him more human-like in ther futur', though they mustn't go too fur, nor skin his head."

In a strain similar to this, Old Rocky continued for some time, but at last relapsed into silence, and urged the mules to greater speed; for he deemed it safe to use the whip, and rattle along, as they had now gone some distance from the timber, and apprehended no further danger from the Apaches.

The darkness was now of such density, that objects could not be distinguished at the distance of fifty yards away; but the old scout had no fear of going astray, especially with Turtle in his company.

At length, when sufficient time had elapsed for the Apaches to have reached the point where lay their dead, Old Rocky halted the team, and both he and the Tonkaway listened intently. They had but a short time to wait.

Soon the night air became filled with howls, and vengeful yells, which gave the old scout great satisfaction; for he gave vent to a long series of chuckles, tearing off a fresh quid of "nigger-head."

The halt lasted but a few minutes, however; for the scouts judged that the mother and son still slept, and they refrained from disturbing them.

On again they proceeded, the mules being now urged into a fast trot, until the cautious scouts knew they were within a short distance of the southern point of the line of mesquites. Then the animals were allowed to walk slowly, the wheels passing noiselessly over the thick mat of mesquite-grass, except when, now and then, there came a sudden jolt of the wagon-body.

Turtle glided on ahead through the darkness, and at last disappeared within the thick bushes.

In a little time the mules and wagon entered the shades on the eastern edge of the mesquites, and Old Rocky dismounted, making sure that Benny and Mrs. Meredith were sleeping. He then unhitched the wheel-mules from the wagon, and led the team out from the mesquites, and along the eastern edge of the same, to a point at some distance from the wagon.

This was out of ear-shot from the trail which the Apaches would naturally take. Here he separated the beasts into pairs, and lariatied them to the edge of the mesquites, removing the bridles, and then returning to the wagon.

But a short time had passed when Turtle emerged quickly from the dark shades to the side of the old scout, and in his laconic style gave information that, although previously anticipated, gave great satisfaction to him.

"Apaches come. Go to Souse Lakes. Got captives for torture."

"How far off?" asked Old Rocky, in a tone of anxiety.

"Great scout see soon. Mollie, she no captive."

Up sprung the old scout in a fury.

"Ef ther condemned skunks hev sent ther leetle gal ter glory afore her time—ef they've hashed ther angel what ther ole man sot his heart onter—dang my cats ef I won't make a lunge at 'em, an' spill my las' bleed right hyer!"

"Dog-gone my ole Texan heart ef I ain't a-b'illin' over wi' grief an' indig'. What war Randal a-doin' an' ther cap'n hisself, ter 'low ther gal ter be wiped offen ther yearth afore his eyes? Hole me, Tonk, er I'll fly to pieces from head ter heel!"

"Too much heap talk on war trail. Apache got open ear."

"Dang'd ef they'll have ary ear et all ef I lunges inter them on ther whiz! I'm all sot back, Tonk."

The old scout meant every word, and more.

He had feared that Mollie Meredith would be captured, but he had never doubted that he and Turtle could rescue her.

The news given by the old Tonkaway, therefore, fairly dazed him.

"Big White Chief, he tie on mustang. Randal he tie on, too," explained Turtle. "Dead braves on mustang. Big White Chief goods on mustang."

Have fight. Mebbe so warriors take Mollie on west trail. No good take all captives on one trail. 'Fraid lose."

This, to him, long speech of his red pard somewhat relieved Old Rocky. The idea advanced by the Tonkaway, that Mollie, being a valuable captive, had been taken by way of the open plain to prevent rescue, was a plausible one. It seemed, indeed, quite probable, and had the two scouts known the exact number of braves who had taken the back trail, by counting the living and the dead as they passed south, they would have been able to decide at once.

As it was, there was no time to lose in sorrow or speculation. The actions of Turtle proved this to the old scout. The Tonkaway made gestures of caution, as he secured his horse to a wheel of the wagon, and then stalked westward, followed by Old Rocky. Both soon crouched in a thicket, which Turtle felt sure the Apaches would pass.

Then the Tonkaway, as he drew his knife, revealed his plan.

"Randal, he tie on horse. One brave ride behind. All other warriors ride in front. Old Rocky catch jaw-strap Apache mustang. Then Turtle he jump, kill brave. No let death-howl sound. Then cut Randal loose. Apache ride fast. No know lose one captive."

"Put yer paw right thar, pard! Tonk, ye're XXX, A1, fust cut IXL every time! Randal will know 'bout Mollie, an' we'll snatch him outen ther kiotes' clutches, sure pop. Carve C. O. D. on ther pesky ornary head-skinners' bestest 'naternity, deep, an' sen' him through on ther long dark trail on ther hum."

"I'll hitch ther mustang an' make a lunge fer ther critter Randal air ridin' an' jerk him inter ther bush, 'lowin' ther outfit ter skute on without him. Dog-goned ef I don't, sure es cristy!"

"S-s-s-sh!" came from Turtle's lips. "Apache

The dull tramp of many ridden and laden steeds crossing the sward now sounded through the mesquites, and the Tonkaway and his white pard made ready for the perilous attempt to rescue "James," the teamster, otherwise Randal Rockwell, from his savage captors.

CHAPTER XIII.

AGAINST DESPERATE ODDS.

OLD ROCKY and Turtle listened intently for a few moments, and soon the form of an Apache warrior, but dimly outlined, rode past to the west of their covert, and within ten feet of the same.

This was followed by another, and another, until six had disappeared southward. Then came several mustangs, heavily packed with the goods of Captain Meredith, driven by three braves. Next, the captain himself, bound fast upon a horse, which was led by two warriors, one riding upon each side.

Close following him were the slain, secured upon mustangs, which were necked together by raw-hide ropes; and in the rear, as Turtle had asserted, was Randal Rockwell, also bound upon a mustang; a single Apache warrior riding behind him.

Turtle touched the arm of the old scout, as a signal, and both bounded from the mesquites like panthers; Old Rocky clutching the jaw-strap of the Apache's mustang, at the same instant that the Tonkaway sprang astride the animal in the rear of his victim.

Forcing his buckskin paint-bag into the mouth of the Apache, with one hand, with an electric movement of the other, his long knife was buried to the hilt in the heaving bronzed breast; only to be jerked out instantly, and drawn across his throat.

No breath or yell from the Apache had been possible.

Hastily scalping his foe, the Tonkaway sprang to the ground, dragging the corpse after him; and then, grasping the jaw-strap from the hand of Old Rocky, who at this moment cut the lariat that connected the two animals, he led the animal upon which Randal was, into the shade of the mesquites.

Hauling his victim into a thicket, Turtle, followed by Old Rocky, leading the mustang of the slain brave, proceeded at once to the wagon. Here, when the released captive recognized the vehicle in the darkness, his mind began to be relieved in regard to the character of his rescuers. The first words that greeted him, transported him from despair to instant joy.

"Dang my cats, Randal! Hyer we air, nat'ral es life, but chuck-full o' hyderphobic indig'. We-uns hes jarked yer from ther bellyuns; but whar's Mollie? What, in thunderation, did yer 'low ther condemned skunks ter skupe her in fer?"

"God bless you, my friends!" said the young man, with deep feeling. "We did the best we could, but they doubled on us. Fifteen or more bucks against two is big odds, for Pennie stole away—or, so I believe—and Mollie was senseless when the big rush came. The chief, with four or five braves, took Mollie from the mesquites, along the western edge."

A grunt burst from Turtle, when Randal spoke of the young girl having been taken to the west plain.

"Turtle talk same to Great Scout," he said, briefly.

"Turtle no talk much. Think heap."

"Dang my cats, Tonk! Yer did git hit squar'. But, pards, ther locate o' purty Miss Mollie air gut ter be lighted down onter, an' she must be scooped outen ther heathun's hands, jist 'bout es speedy es hit can be did. Thar's a heap ter 'splain on both sides, but we hain't time fer gab. We-uns hes gut Benny an' Marm Meredith, an' ther mules an' waggun; an' we laid a power o' 'Paches out cold south et ther lakes; put some ter soak fer alligator feed."

"You have done wonders," said Randal; "and I can't understand how you two have accomplished so much. My brain is in a perfect whirl with all

that has happened. Captain Meredith and his daughter are indeed in a most fearful position; but I will sacrifice my life, if need be, to save them. I have been wounded, you perceive, by one of the Apache arrows."

"Low ther Tonk ter 'zamine hit, though thar ain't much show in ther dark. Reckon, mebbe so, a couple o' ther ha'r-t'arers'll skute on ther back trail soon, ter 'vestergate things. Dog-gone my cats! Ef ther cloud hain't did hit's biz; an' ther moon air 'bout ter kick ther blanket offen hit's face, which'll 'how things up fine all 'roun'."

"Ef Mollie air on ther west perrarer, I'll dang soon freeze my peepers onder her. Tonk, fix up our pard, an' I'll take a leetle lone scout fer fresh p'int. Don't fret, fer ef ther greasy piruts levants back, I'll let yer know, time enough ter open biz on 'em."

With these words, Old Rocky stole through the mesquites, just as the silvery moon burst forth from the black clouds, that were now passing toward the western horizon.

"Waugh! Moon good. Heap good," muttered the Tonkaway, as he dressed the wound of Randal, applying to it a portion of the pulp of a prickly-pear, the most effectual of vegetable healers.

"Where are Mrs. Meredith and Benny, Turtle?" asked the young man, after profuse thanks to his red nurse, which, however, were unheeded.

"Both sleep in wheel-lodge. Heap scare. Heap ride. Heap tired. Talk no good on war-path."

Thus replied the Tonkaway. Then standing erect, he adjusted his paint-bag, tightened his belt, and stood, silent as a statue of bronze, facing southward.

Randal lay outstretched at his feet, striving to return natural circulation to his benumbed feet and hands.

Through it all, no sound came from the wagon, and, as the Apache mustangs had been secured to mesquites some distance away, all was silent around.

Thus stood the Tonkaway, for full five minutes; then he sunk to the earth, and placed his ear to the sward.

But a moment thus; then again he stood as before.

This time, however, his eyes blazed with vengeful anticipation and thirst for blood, while his hand yet clutched at his knife, yet stained with the fresh blood of an Apache brave—his hated foe!

At that moment, a snake-like hiss caused him to start with eagerness, bounding without a word of explanation into the mesquites. Turtle sprang directly to the point whence the hiss proceeded, where Old Rocky awaited him. The latter said quietly, as he approached:

"More ha'r ter gather in, Tonk. Dang'd ef biz ain't brist night! We'll thin this hyer war-party ef we-uns keeps on this-a-way. Thar's only a pa'r on 'em this time. They couldn't spar more, I reckon."

"I heerd them yelp soon as ther moon popped out, an' they spit out a power o' asseffederty—'Pache slang, when they foun' thet a buck an' ther captive war missin'."

"We kin skupe 'em in, an' not half try. Foller me right erlong, an' pick yer meat! Ther's hefty biz ahead 'sides this, fer I gut a squint o' Mollie bein' tuck to'ard ther lakes, 'cross ther plain funder west. We has gut ter git thar some sort o' way, 'fore sun up."

Further talk was impossible, without betraying their presence. This, however, seemed to be suspected, for the two Apaches approached warily and slowly, after arriving in the vicinity of the mesquites.

"Dang'd ef ther cusses won't git erway from we-uns," whispered the old scout. "Less glide back, crawl hoss-meat, an' keep nigh ther waggun ontill they comes 'long inter good persish. Then we kin lasso 'em, an' choke 'em off, slick an' easy."

As answer to this proposition, Turtle whirled in his tracks, and stalked back toward the point where the mustangs had been secured; thus showing that his reasoning was the same as the old scout's.

In five minutes, both were well seated in their saddles, each with a deadly noose adjusted. The point they had chosen, was the spot at which Turtle had slain his victim; the body of the Apache having been thrown out into the moonlight, in such a manner as to prevent the gory skull from being seen from the southern approach up the track.

Both knew, that the coming Apaches would, upon discovering the corpse, believe that the captive had loosened his bonds, killed his guard, and fled; consequently they would not entertain any suspicions as to danger to themselves.

Advantageously stationed, one on either side of the narrow clear space, within which the corpse lay, the scouts now waited; their only anxiety being, that possibly the half-wild steeds upon which they were mounted, might become restless as their fellow-beasts appeared upon the scene, and thus betray them.

However, they had every hope of being successful; for, if the lassoes failed, they were resolved to use fire-arms, rather than allow either of the braves to escape.

As yet, it was pretty clear that none of the war-party were aware that the two enemies they had chased to the Souze Lakes had left the vicinity.

When, however, the scene at the lake should have been examined, the Apaches would conclude that Turtle had left his mark on the slain, had gone with the recovered vehicle toward the mesquites, and that Old Rocky had accompanied him.

Not long had the two watchers to wait; but, for all their plans, their object would not have been

attained, had not the Apaches discovered the corpse of their fellow-brave. A moment's reflection sufficed to convince the two warriors that the captive must have, in some way, released his arms, killed the warrior, and escaped. This being so, there could be no danger to themselves.

Had they not reasoned in this way, from a mere glance at the surroundings, they would have dismounted, and stealthily examined every thicket in the vicinity of the body, and thus frustrated the well-contrived plan of the scouts, by discovering them both, and then undoubtedly making their escape among the favoring shades of the mesquites.

As it was, the two braves immediately approached, one on either side of the corpse; their mustangs snorting at the scent of human blood, and the sight of the outstretched slaughtered brave.

At the very instant that the Indians were in the act of throwing their legs over their animals to dismount, the lassoes hissed through the air, the deadly nooses, true to the aim of the practiced dexterous throwers, dropping over the two feathered heads.

Without a pause, both Turtle and Old Rocky gave terrific yells, and jabbed deep their spurs; their steeds bounding clear of the mesquites, and down the narrow "open," to the southward, dragging the two braves over the ground, they all the while clutching frantically at the rawhide ropes that were choking their lives out. But in vain. Their legs flew in the air, their faces and forms contorted in fearful agony, their black snake-like eyes bulged from their sockets, with all the horror and terror, and torture, which they could not express by yell or howl.

The lassoes, which were fast to the saddles of the scouts, were straight and stiff as bars of iron; and the affrighted mustangs bounded forward, tearing up the sward, in their maddened efforts to fly from the dragging and violently contorting objects.

Each of the braves was now a revolving, twisting, squirming mass of legs, arms and feathers, with wildly-tossing and tangled hair, arrows, quivers, bows, and paint and medicine-bags, torn and shattered, and strewn the torn-up trail!

"Giv' 'em a lively leetle circus, Tonk," said the old scout; "fer hit's ther last they'll ever wag a feather at. Lunge 'em inter ther Injun kingdom come, on ther flip-flop whiz! Dog-gone my cats, ef thet warn't done up 'bout es slick es ever I see'd, an' right on ther dot by ther watch; fer, another breathe, an' our dan'd nags would ha' smashed brush, snorted an' g'n us cl'ar erway!"

"Hit war a surprise-party o' ther sort that we-uns air indulgin' in offen an' frequent o' late; an' we hes som more on ther p'ogramme."

"Whoop 'em up! Scratch ther bugs outen thar ha'r, an' some o' ther grease an' paint offen thar carkisses. Kerral our purty Miss Mollie, would yer? Yer 'farnal ornary slab-sides, crank-legged, snake-eyed p'ison-spittin' sons o' Satan!"

While thus giving vent to his satisfaction in words and glances back ward, Old Rocky, as did also the Tonkaway, urged his mustang here and there, between the clumps of mesquites; the struggling victims of the lassoes being dragged around the sides of the thorny thickets, tearing the little clothing they wore from their forms, and scratching their flesh until they were a mass of gore.

At last they no longer struggled. Their limbs dragged limp and straight behind them; and the nerveless bodies lay along the sward in the same manner. The scouts had exhausted the ingenuity of vengeance. Two more of the merciless Apache demons had met their deserts.

CHAPTER XIV.

STILL ON TO THE RESCUE.

No sooner were the two scouts satisfied that their lassoed victims were devoid of life, powerless to ever again endanger the lives of themselves or their friends, than both cast loose the lariats that had served them so well, and galloped toward the south end of the mesquites; where they could command a view of both the south and southwest plains.

Both made halt within the margin of the mesquites near each other, being themselves screened from view; and gazed eagerly over the moon-illuminated prairie, the old scout at once exclaiming:

"Dang my cats! Ef ther bellyuns hain't stopped, ter wait fer ther two skunks that we-uns sent on ther long dark trail; but they'll hev a hefty ole time ter wait, an' prob'ly some on 'em may hev ter g'n a death-yell, an' skute fer ther happy huntin'-groun's, afore seein' 'em. Howsomever, they hain't gut bucks enough ter spar' any more; an' they'll hev ter glide 'long to'ard timmer afore soon, I reckon."

"Look!" said the Tonkaway, pointing his finger toward the southwest, "Apache chief got Mollie."

"I gut a glimpse of 'em fust off, Tonk; but hit tortur's my ole Texas heart ter paze, an' think o' ther leetle gal, an' how she's fixed 'bout now."

"Tonk, we-uns hes gut ter cross ther plain back ag'in, afore sun-up, without brin' see'd, er ther cap'n an' Mollie'll be goners, dead sure an' sartain!"

"Thar never war a bunch o' 'Paches wuss mixed up, er more full o' prussic acid indig' an' cussedness than ther sons o' Satan 'cross thar. They hes had sich a ornightry hard run arter we-uns, losin' sich a power o' ha'r, an' Randal bein' tuck from 'em, thet they won't onc't think o' levantin' Pecos way wi' ther cap'n an' Mollie; but they'll tortur' 'em right thar; ef ther Souze Lakes, an' then scatter, an' go fer ha'r an' hosses, right an' left."

"Thet's ther way I'm 'pinionated on ther subjick. What d'yer say, Tonk?"

"Old Rocky, he great scout. Talk heap good. Best go to lake. Save Mollie. Save Big White Chief."

"Hunky boy! I thought yer'd see 'bout es I did."

Come on! Thar's no time ter spill 'roun' loose. What in thunderation air we-uns goin' to do wi' Benny an' his marm? Reckon Randal kin limber up, an' glide 'long with us."

"Benny, he drive wagon to Frio. He big little, brave. Heap crawl. Heap climb. Mebbe so heap swim on war-path."

"Thet's 'bout how I puts hit up. Hyer we air, et ther waggun. Everything air lively, Randal; an' ther buzzard flops wings, ag'in' ther eye-winkers o' ther man in ther moon."

"I am so glad you have returned," said the young man. "I have been extremely anxious and apprehensive. The very air seems pregnant with danger."

Turtle turned his horse to one side, and disappeared in the mesquites. He was bent on securing the bloody trophies of the war-trail.

"Hes Benny an' Marm Meredith hed thar snooze out yit?" asked Old Rocky, dismounting.

"No. I have not heard the slightest movement from the wagon," was the reply from Randal.

"Wa-al, pard, does yer feel es though yer c'u'd travel ag'in? Ef we-uns doesn't hump ourselves back ter ther lakes, an' do some ornightry fine scoutin' arter we gits thar, wi' slatin' an' shootin' counted in, Miss Mollie an' ther cap'n'll sit scari-fied, hashed, an' tortur'd permisc'usly; dead sure an' sartain!"

"God preserve them!" groaned the young man. "I am ready, this very moment, to dash to their rescue; but what, in the name of wonder, are we to do with Mrs. Meredith and Ben? Surely, you do not think of taking the wagon with you to the lakes?"

"Tonk an' I war opinin' thet we'd better hev Benny levant back wi' ther waggun an' his marm, Frio-way; but yer hes g'n me an idee. We-uns may need thet waggun to play a trick on ther smoky sons o' Satan. I'll hitch up, an' we'll glide 'long, 'lowin' Ben an' his marm to siester es much es they choose. Hit's jist the idee."

"Git yer j'int's loosened, Randal, an' yer kin ride one o' ther 'Pache ponies. We-uns hes gut ter strike no'theast a sight er so, an' then east ontill we kin make a straight skute to'ard ther Newersis, without ther kiotes gittin' the'r peepers friz onder us. Then we kin levant west, under kiver o' timber, plum inter ther camp; er keep ther drink atween us, jist es we chooses."

The old scout immediately departed after the mules, and soon the animals were again harnessed, and attached to the wagon; the Tonkaway riding up at that moment, and springing lightly to the ground, securing his mustang to the wagon.

He then proceeded after the horses belonging to himself and Old Rocky. Both these and the mules had now rested somewhat, and grazed sufficiently to partially satisfy their hunger. Turtle returned, and stood, holding the bridle-reins of both horses, while he gazed inquiringly at the old scout.

"Tonk," said the latter, "I hes concluded thet we-uns mought play some sort o' a sarcumventin' rifice on ther cussed, 'Pache wi' ther wagguns; an' thet hit's best, all 'roun', ter roll her 'long. Ben an' his marm air siesterin' yit, an' we kin p'int on a big spreadin' detower, es Joe Looth used ter say, an' leave ther outfit in ther bush ontill we needs hit."

"How does ther new p'ogramme dove-tail in wi' yer?"

"Look at moon," returned Turtle, pointing heavenward. "No time for council-talk. Old Rocky, great scout. It is good. Take wheel-lodge."

"Take her 'long hit air! Randal, crawl in an' take a snooze ontill yer is chuck up fer biz. Don't disturb ther folkses. Hit'll rest yer bones, an' save some hoss vim; fer ther critters hes all slung luffs rapid. Tonk, yer better crawl in too, I reckon."

"Turtle, he stay on mustang," was the reply.

"Hal! hal! hal!" laughed Old Rocky. "I'd a' tuck my afferdavy yer w'u'dn't ride on wheels, Tonk; but I thought I'd try yer. All set. Levant's the word!"

"Hyer we goes, ter clean out ther 'Pache outfit, an' save ther leetle gal an' her cap'n. Reckon ther ole man'll git some o' ther cross-grained mulishness tuck outen him afore he's reskied; but he kin spar' a heap, an' not damidge his usefulness."

Off dashed the mule team, the Tonkaway riding in the rear; but it had not proceeded far, when the old scout suddenly burst into a loud laugh, and brought the team to a halt. This caused Randal, who was just drifting into somolency, to spring up on the front board of the wagon; thinking, for the moment, that the war-whoops of the Apaches had sounded in his ears.

Mrs. Meredith and Ben, now startled from their slumbers as well seeing Randal, were greatly astonished, almost believing that the recent horrors had been a dream. At length Old Rocky spoke:

"Dod-gast it, folkses! I warn't 'tendin' ter start this hyer surprise-party—'deed I warn't—an' hit 'pears a leetle onhuman-like fer me ter be a-laughin'; but I swar I c'u'dn't help it. I sh'u'd ha' bu'st, dead sure. Fac' air, I hes ter laugh onc't in er while on ther trail; an' I offen hes ter git down an' chew grass er bushes, ter keep from bu'tin' night out, when I'm cluss up ter ther ha'r-t'arers."

"Randal, tell leetle ten an' his marm all 'bout things, an' ther futur' p'ogramme, arter I git through my explain. Jist listen a minot, an' Ten, yeou too!"

"Yer see, hit hain't but jist popped inter m' brain-box thet we-uns air a-doin' a boss thing. We're 'bleeged ter p'int no'therly, keepin' ther eend o' ther mesquites atween us, an' ther reds; which air takin' us a few right smart stretches outen our way. But es I hes jist see'd, suddint-like, thet ef hit war es dark es a pocket, we orter do the same thing. 'Cos why? Ther condemned skunks, when they a'l gits tergether, on ther lake'll be b'arrin' n'ad 'bout

losin' their captive an' three bucks, an' also et ther waggun gittin' erway in ther same direc'.

"Consequently, they'll sen' a party et sun-up, ter vestergate; an' findin' ther scalped corpusses an' her waggun trail, 'sides knowin' by ther 'sign' thet onk an' me air 'long, they'll chaw the'r tongues off 'i' pure indig'. D'yer see ther place whar ther fun comes in, Tonk? We're a-gainin' time by losin' hit."

"While ther kiotes air on this trail, we'll be shed of 'em; an' fore they hev kivered our 'sign,' an' gut ack ter ther lakes, ef we hain't gut through biz wi' her rest o' ther cusses, we'd orter stick our heads in ote-holes, an' keep 'em thar ontill Gabriel's horn ts. Now yer all knows what made me bu'st."

"Old Rocky great scout," said the Tonkaway. "Old Rocky make long trail for Apache dogs."

"G'long thar! Glides ther word. Randal, don't low them ter keep yer from yer siesterin'."

Away, once more, rolled the wagon over the prairie sward, at a course nearly parallel with the mesquites; until the old scout was satisfied that the vehicle could not be seen by the Apaches. He then turned to the eastward, circling afterward to the south, and toward the Nueces; aiming to strike near the river, below the Souse Lakes, and then up, screened from view by the timber, to the lower end of the chain of water-holes, some five miles below, and to the Apache encampment.

It would be useless to attempt to describe the feelings of Mrs. Meredith and her son, when Randal Rockwell related the dread occurrences of the night after the departure of the youth in pursuit of his mother; who was then being carried away senseless, in the wagon, by the galloping and affrighted mules.

When they fully realized that Captain Meredith, and the idolized daughter and sister were in the power of the merciless Apaches, they were prostrated with grief and despair; although they had been prepared for, or at least apprehending that such was the fact.

The boy, after the first outburst of anguish, became furious, and was resolved to save his sister at any risk; but Randal, by well-chosen words, impressed upon him the necessity of his remaining with his mother, while the scouts and himself made an attempt to save the captives.

Then when all the miraculous achievements of the brave and noble scouts had been spoken of, and their great skill taken into consideration, they all felt more hopeful.

Mrs. Meredith, ever thoughtful of others, prevailed upon Randal to lie down and sleep; for his help would be greatly needed, and without the rest that he so much required, he could hope to be of but little assistance.

The young man complied, and then, mother and son, locked in each other's arms, sat conversing in low whispers, as the wagon rattled over the prairie; he old scout cracking his whip, and the faithful Tonkaway sitting stiff and stoical upon his horse, in the rear, his black eyes sweeping the plain on all sides.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE APACHE CAMP.

MOLLIE MEREDITH was not a maiden who was in the habit of fainting; but the horrors through which she had passed, the terrible sights, the disappearance of her mother and brother, all this was enough to have caused even a strong man to swoon with horror.

Not a mile had the Apache chief galloped from the mesquites, however, when the young girl's senses returned, although it would have been far better for her had she remained as before, for she at once sprung upward, and shot glances around her, while she shuddered with loathing and horror, as she realized that she was in the arms of a merciless Apache, who for aught she knew might have with his own hands, shed the blood of her father and her lover.

Although her eyes had at first become fixed in a dazed stare upon the paint-daubed face of her captor, she had on the instant, recalled the near past, and realized her horrible position, and the fearful fate that awaited her. She then sprung up, to ascertain if any of the others were prisoners with her.

To her unspeakable anguish and despair, she found that she was alone in her captivity; there being but four braves galloping in the rear of the one who clutched her tightly in his arms.

It was then that her apprehensions were most torturing. She feared that her father and her lover had both been slain; indeed it did not seem possible that they would have permitted her to be taken from the barricade, had they been alive.

At times, the snake-like eyes of the poor girl's captor, glared gloatingly from out their hideous framework of paint-daubs, into hers; forcing her to close her lids with loathing and wretchedness, and to pray most fervently for deliverance from a fate, of which she dared not think, without a shudder and chilling of her blood.

Then, as the cloud obscured the moon, she felt greatly relieved; for it seemed a good omen—a promise of Divine aid. It spared her, too, the sight of that most fiend-like face; although, at times, the st and fetid breath of the savage fanned her cheek, driving the blood back to her heart, and causing her to become deathly sick.

In horror, she cringed away from the fearful face, that seemed not of earth, but of Hades.

On and on flew the steed; every bound of the animal seeming to the maiden to be widening the distance between her and hope, and hastening her nearer to despair, and a horrible fate, to which, in comparison, death would be a mercy.

Not a word, meanwhile, spoke the Apache; and it seemed ages to the poor girl, before the moon again illumined the white plain.

The rapid and continuous rolling tramp, or thud, of the hoofs of the mustangs, the snorts of the same, and the hiss and whack of the quirts, together with the rattle of arrows in the dog-skin quivers—these were all the sounds she could hear, and these, at length, became monotonous.

They tortured her sensitive nerves, and she longed for a halt, a rest from her fatigue; for her position was most uncomfortable, even without considering the murderous arms that clung about her slight and tender form.

Suddenly the Apache jerked his mustang to a halt, as did also his comrades, gazing with seeming interest eastward; the face of the captive girl being turned in the opposite direction.

Resolved, however, that she would ascertain the character of that which had occasioned such interest among her captors, Mollie sprung up, turned her head toward the east, and before the Apaches, with a grunt of anger, could thrust her back, she had caught a view of a number of horsemen and packed animals; the former being Indians, with one exception, who had not the long hair and feathers so conspicuous.

Only a fitting glance did she catch, but that was sufficient to photograph the view upon her brain, and to give her food for thought, and for hope.

That there was a white man, a captive in the party, Mollie felt confident; also, that the Indians were the same who had followed and attacked the wagon.

A moment's reasoning was sufficient to enable the intelligent girl to decide that the few braves, with whom she was traveling, were some of the original party, and that they had separated from the main body after the capture of the barricade; for it must have been captured, and the packed animals she had observed, were laden with her father's goods.

The white captive might, indeed, be her parent, or possibly her lover. In either case, there was some consolation, as it proved that one of the number, besides herself, yet lived.

The party seemed to be headed in the same direction as her captors were traveling, and at the halt, a side-glance ahead showed Mollie a dark, serpentine line stretched east and west, while a swell in the line seemed to be quite near.

She well knew that this dark line was the timber that bordered the Souse Lakes and the Rio Nueces, the latter being the further beyond, and she recalled the fact that Old Rocky and the Tonkaway had been chased toward that very timber.

Perhaps the two famous scouts had escaped their pursuers, and if so the young girl knew that they would do all in their power to save her.

As the Apaches continued on their march, Mollie, thanks to these reasonings, began to feel somewhat relieved and hopeful, although there was indeed but little upon which she could found a hope.

At the halt her captor had uttered several ejaculations to his fellow-braves, a guttural conversation followed, which, although in the Apache tongue, Mollie judged by the manner and tone of the words that were spoken that something had transpired in connection with the party over the plain—something which seemed to have excited in them no little anger and amazement.

Soon after this the poor girl was much gratified at finding that they were riding beneath the moss-draped arches of the towering timber, for she believed that she would now, at all events, be released from the clasp of the loathsome arms that held her, and relieved from gazing into the hideous face that bent at times over her with a look of fiendish triumph.

While crashing through the undergrowth the maiden was chilled to the very soul by a series of most hellish whoops and howls, which now burst forth in front of them and echoed weirdly through the timber. These fearful sounds were replied to by her captors, and caused yells of exultation from the dark depths ahead, into which, here and there, shot arrows of moonlight, adding greatly to the wild and unearthly beauty of the scene.

But a few moments elapsed when her captor jerked his mustang to a halt, and rudely pushed his fair burden from his embrace to the earth, to which Mollie sunk in utter exhaustion and horror, for she found herself surrounded by a horde of hideous dismounted Apaches, while camp-fires blazed at intervals, lending to the scene a more unearthly aspect than can well be conceived.

The black, serpent-like eyes of the clustering braves glared and flashed with most murderous exultation at their beautiful captive.

Immediately Mollie was grasped by two braves, who, at the order of the one in whose loathsome embrace she had been forced to ride, and who appeared to be the chief of the war-party, she was bound to a sapling on the border of the natural opening in which the camp was situated.

Burly braves now stalked before her, pinching her cheeks and running their greasy fingers through the abundant tresses which hung to her waist, almost vailing her form to that extent.

In broken English they muttered "heap good scalp," and uttered expressions similar in their character, much to the disgust and horror of the hapless girl. Her eyes now shone with a wild and unnatural look, and her fair face was stamped with a hopeless agony. Yet, strange to say, through it all she retained her senses, and inspected the scene with the most eager interest to discover, if it were possible, something that might give her the slightest hope of escape.

But in vain. Naught was presented to her view

on any side, but terrible sights that tended to plunge her still deeper into the depths of despondency.

A half-dozen small fires burned within the opening, about which sticks cut from the undergrowth projected from the earth. These were scorched, and upon some were fragments of meat, indicating that the savages had partaken of the evening meal some time previous to her arrival.

A dead horse, from which the flesh had been partly cut, lay at one side of the camp, and the recent arrivals proceeded at once to slash strips of meat from the carcass. These they cast upon the coals, merely scorching them, and then devouring them, like half-starved beasts.

But a few guttural ejaculations passed between the chief and a warrior, from whose fillet flaunted two eagle feathers, and this was when they had first arrived. But the low, vengeful growls and grunts, and the significant murderous gestures of the chief, together with his furiously contorted face, proved that the information revealed had occasioned in him most intense anger, and increased his thirst for revenge.

Mollie had not failed to notice this. Indeed, she felt that her life depended upon her own exertions and watchfulness, still believing that, possibly, some opening might present itself for escape.

She now felt positive that both Turtle and Old Rocky had evaded the Indians, and might be lurking near at hand, with the object of ascertaining if the Apaches had captured any of the party that they had been guiding. So time passed.

Again the wood echoed with the terrible whoops and howls that had burst on the ear of the captive girl, when they first arrived; but these sounds increased in power, and soon every warrior stalked into the camp, brandishing their weapons in their hands, yelling like fiends incarnate, and enacting a mimic battle in pantomime.

On they went, as if the air was filled with foes, whom they hurled to the earth with exultant whoops, stabbing at them again and again.

After this they went through the motions of scalping their imaginary victims, increasing at this their victorious yells.

Then, to the horror of poor Mollie, the heads of many wild-eyed steeds broke through the undergrowth into the camp, and upon the backs of these were the blood-smeared corpses of the slain, their sightless eyes seeming to glare toward the trembling maiden from their surrounding daubs of paint.

Following these came other mustangs, upon which were packed the piles of goods belonging to Captain Meredith, and which had formed the barricade.

Poor Mollie gazed at these, the links that seemed to connect her with her relatives and with another life. But there was joy amid it all.

They brought hope; for they proved to her that the Indians she had seen upon the plain had arrived in camp, and that she would soon, without doubt, see her father, whose presence, even as a captive, would be a consolation and relief.

The presence of the corpses explained the hideous howls and yells that had been uttered by the Apaches; and Mollie now feared that, from the fact that the dead had been brought into camp, the Indians would be more merciless, more eager and clamorous to murder herself and her father.

She had hope, however, that her mother and Benny had escaped; else she would have found them here.

But now the dead were unbound from the mustangs, and laid side by side upon the sward, their arms being placed near them; it was a ghastly spectacle, and the heart of the poor girl sprung to her throat as a most vengeful yell burst from each of the savages, and another horse sprung from the bushes, upon which was bound—her father!

She gave an outcry of mingled joy and sympathy as she saw him; and Captain Meredith, drawn by that cry, gazed upon his daughter from over the heads of the demoniac Apaches, while his iron frame trembled, and his face filled with soul-drawn anguish, and the bitterness of death.

Then the strong man bowed his head and closed his eyes, as if he could no longer bear the sight.

Quickly and roughly he was torn from the horse, and bound to a tree on the opposite side of the camp, and facing his daughter; but at such a distance that they could not converse.

The hopeless appearance of her parent was a greater grief to Mollie than any woe that had preceded it; as, from his manner, and the absence of Randal, she feared that her lover had fallen in the conflict at the barricade.

Listlessly, and as if all hope had flown, as if his heart was now tortured beyond all power of endurance for having brought his child into such awful peril, thus stood Captain Meredith.

He was in an upright position, held so more by his bonds than his strength. His head was bowed upon his breast, and his tears fell like rain upon the dead leaves at his feet.

This last sign of weakness in their captive caused the Apaches to yell with scorn and contempt as they went on in their work of unpacking the goods from the mustangs, and piling them together.

Not many minutes passed when again came blood-curdling howls from all, as a series of signals sounded from the east, and soon after another party entered the camp. This was composed of six braves, each of whom led a mustang, upon which was bound a scalpless, blood-stained warrior.

These were laid beside the others, amid howls that caused the festoons of moss, that hung from the branches that arched the camp, to quiver and sway.

Dread and weird, indeed, was the scene.

Horrible and hellish were the sounds that rent the air and filled the hapless captives with an awful and sickening dread.

CHAPTER XVI.

DOOMED.

THE sun arose, a brazen ball of fire in the east, shooting aslant its bright rays in the timber of Souse Lakes.

Here and there the hideous braves stalked, in a silence that seemed ominous of death to the captives.

The corpses of the slain were placed in a circle, the feet all pointing inward, thus forming a round, clear space. Still the captives were unable to see anything that seemed to bear upon their own fate.

Both, however, felt an inward conviction that they were destined, in some way, to take a part in the coming ceremonies, for a large stake had been inserted in a hole directly in the center of the space referred to, and the ground pounded firm about it.

Then the captives were unbound and secured to the same, back to back. Captain Meredith now spoke:

"Mollie, my darling, I have brought you to this! But there is one thing to cheer us. James, I feel assured, has escaped, and neither of the scouts has been taken, or we would have known it. I believe, also, that your mother and Benny are safe, or these fiends would torture us all together.

"Keep up hope, my darling! We may not be sacrificed before our friends have an opportunity to save us. For myself, I feel the strength of a dozen men, when I think of the fate for which they have destined us. May God give you strength to bear up and hope!"

"Oh, father!" exclaimed the poor girl; "I feel that there is no hope for us. These savages are thirsting for revenge, and will not spare us.

"But, father, I have a confession to make, while time is left me to do it. I can deceive you no longer. James—your teamster, is none other than Randal Rockwell. He assumed that disguise that he might help to protect us, for he believed in the dangers that you made light of.

"He was wounded in defending us—he may yet meet his death at the hands of the Indians—but it has all been done for me. They all knew him except you, papa. Old Rocky engaged him—"

The last few words of the poor girl came in a gasping whisper, and they were here interrupted by a horrible howl, that came in concert from every savage throat in the camp.

Nearly two-score in number, each having just added to his hideousness by renewing his war-paint, the Apaches now ranged themselves in a circle around the dead, the captives being in the center.

Only for a moment stood they thus.

Turning their eyes from their prisoners to the bodies of their slain fellow braves, the spectacle seemed to electrify them, as one man, into fury.

Up went weapon-laden arms wildly, and out from their throats, as they bounded into the air, came howl after howl, as they whirled and leaped this way and that, slashing the air with their knives, while their eyes glared like those of wild beasts. Then again all was silent. But only for a moment.

Each now half turned, facing the back of his neighbor, and thus they danced around in a crouched position, gesticulating to the dead, and then toward the sky. All this time, war-whoops and yells of demoniac fury resounded, until the woods seemed a perfect pandemonium.

Soon, however, the hellish circle stopped, and all stooped low, and began whispering to the ghastly slain, and pointing their arrows and knives toward the captives. This done, they resumed their devilish dance; the yells now giving place to a dreary and monotonous chant, and then every brave regained his first position, motionless as a statue.

When the chant ended, half of the warriors sprung from the circle, relieved themselves of their weapons, and returning lifted the bodies of the slain, and strode away with them into the undergrowth.

On their return, all formed in a line, and went at a dog-trot around the camp, circling about the captives. The head of the line, at last, turned toward the carcass of the dead horse, and with vengeful whoop slashed a portion of the meat from it. He then bounded from the carcass, the next doing likewise; and so on, until each brave had a chunk of the bloody horse-flesh in his left hand.

This, they all waved about their heads.

Then, again, they circled around their captives, each shaking the piece of meat in the faces of the captain and Mollie, until all had gone through this disgusting ceremony.

This done, with fearful yells, they broke in a mad mob, and all rushed through the undergrowth, toward the lake. This, the captives knew, must be near at hand; for they could hear the splash of what they judged to be the pieces of horse-meat being cast into the water. This greatly puzzled them, but it was soon to be made sufficiently, and most horribly plain.

Soon, half a dozen warriors came stalking on their return to the captives, and both Captain Meredith and Mollie felt that their hour had come.

The captain was now unslashed from the stake, the thongs that bound his ankles were removed, and his arms were lashed more firmly together behind his back; being drawn tightly in such a manner as to give him great pain. He was then hurried away, as he called to his daughter:

"They are taking me from you, my child. Oh, may Heaven preserve you from these merciless fiends in human shape!"

For some time, Mollie listened intently, expecting to hear the shrieks that torture would draw from him; but not a sound was heard.

Captain Meredith was hurried from the camp southward, and taken through the timber and undergrowth for a short distance, to a shelving and muddy bank of the lake. Here, the water was some thirty feet from the line of trees; but, to the right, a huge monarch of the forest had fallen into the lake, its branches, with one or two exceptions, having been riven by lightning.

The immense trunk hung over the water, one of the branches having been driven into the mud, and served as a support; the other was some ten feet in height, and projected upward from the trunk.

Out upon this fallen tree, the captain was forced; one brave dragging him, another following, and pushing him.

The poor man at first believed that he was to be drowned, and congratulated himself upon the fact. It was an easy death to die, if die he must. He soon realized, however, that this was not to be the case, at least, not at once; for he was firmly secured to the upright stump of the limb just referred to, and bound fast enough to make escape impossible. At the same time, there was space enough to allow him to step a pace or two on either side of the limb; although he was forced to face the shore.

This space, he noticed, was crowded with braves; all gazing at him with vengeful exultation. This greatly puzzled him; their manner indicating that he was about to be made a victim to some one of their cruel modes of torture. So, at least, he interpreted the situation. Still, their proceedings were a mystery; unless they considered, that to part him from his child was a torture in itself.

The two braves, who, had bound the captain, now rejoined their comrades, when all disappeared in the undergrowth. Captain Meredith was left alone.

Suddenly he started, as if stricken with a bullet, nearly losing his foothold upon the tree-trunk; for he heard a splash in the lake behind him, and the thought now struck him that some horrible death awaited him, the source of which he had not discovered. The splash caused thoughts to flash through his mind like lightning.

He now recalled the fact that Old Rocky had told him that the Souse Lakes were infested with huge alligators. Some of the horse-meat which the braves had hurled into the lake now lay before him, but not all. Of this he was convinced, and he bent partly around, at the risk of falling, thus casting his whole weight upon his wrists.

At once he perceived several pieces of dead wood, to which were bound chunks of the meat; these were floating upon the water at different points.

The secret of the splashing that he had heard was no longer a secret.

And more than this he saw, for here and there were black and slimy objects, which a close scrutiny revealed to be huge alligators, their heads projecting from the waters, as they slowly neared his position from all parts of the lake—a crescent of horrible saurian monsters, most disgusting, loathsome, and terrible to contemplate.

The cold sweat stood upon Captain Meredith's brow. This, then, was the fate to which he was doomed.

His iron frame trembled from head to foot.

He was to be torn in pieces by these struggling, slimy monsters, and carried piecemeal into the dark and muddy depths to be devoured!

But another reflection contradicted this.

He knew that the alligators could not reach him, even should he lose his foothold, and slip into the lake; for the little slack of the rope by which he was bound would allow his feet to extend only a short distance below the log.

Certainly his feet would be beyond the reach of the saurians, and the ungainly things could not reach the tree-trunk, as the wide-spreading, torn-up roots made this an impossibility.

Yes, he was safe, and the Apaches must be aware of the fact. But what, then, was their object?

As he thus cogitated, a piercing shriek cut the air from the direction of the camp, causing Captain Meredith to cry out in anguish:

"Oh, my child! My darling—God protect her!"

Shriek after shriek rung through the arches of the bottom-timber, the sounds fast approaching the Captain's position. Then, crashing through the undergrowth with fierce yells and whoops, came the hideous horde, and out upon the bank, a burly brave in their midst, holding poor Mollie at arm's length above his head by clutch of limb and shoulder.

Screaming with agony and dread, she was placed upon her feet, and the inhuman monsters tore the clothing in shreds from her form from the waist up, strips of rags hanging from thence to her feet. Soon she was bound to a trimmed sapling, facing her father and the lake, and then the torturers of the *llanos* as suddenly disappeared, with yells of vengeance and triumph.

Father and daughter thus bound, stood staring at each other, the sweat of agony standing on the brow of each.

On the instant everything was plain. Captain Meredith now saw the meaning of these preparations.

His daughter was doomed to be torn by the loathsome alligators before his eyes!

The flesh of the horse had been thrown there to decoy the hideous reptiles, to tempt them to the human feast!

The sapling had been trimmed for the hellish purpose. The favorable locality for such a fiendish crime—a crime unnamed in the annals of atrocity—had been expressly chosen by these paint-daubed demons.

As all this came into the mind of Captain Meredith, he uttered a shriek of horror; his feet slipped, and he sunk senseless, upheld by the torturing ropes of raw-hide that cut his flesh terribly, but he knew it not.

Seeing all this at a glance, and noting also the crescent of hideous heads approaching, the captive girl comprehended the character of her doom. It needed nothing more.

There came one shriek of hopeless despair, and mortal dread; and then, God in mercy relieved her of all knowledge of her misery.

Her head sunk forward. Her face was veiled in her wealth of wavy hair, as she sunk lower and lower, hanging upon her bonds; its golden beauty mingling with the green grass that grew along the edge of the timber!

CHAPTER XVII.

ON TIME.

OLD ROCKY well knew the distance he had to travel, and the gait to which he must force the mules, if he would arrive at the point he wished, east of the Souse Lakes, before the sun arose.

He carried out his "programme" to the letter.

Benny Meredith was induced to remain with his mother, until such time as he should see the red kerchief of Old Rocky flying from a designated tree, on the margin of the Souse Lakes timber.

Then, he was to quickly attach the mules to the wagon, and drive to the point to which the signal would guide him; leaving his mother in a dense thicket, to which her couch was taken, and where she would be safer than anywhere else.

Turtle was silent, as usual, but cast frequent, and—for him—anxious glances toward the timber, which concealed his foes, as well as those whom he was determined to save from their vengeance.

But no time was lost, when once Old Rocky had arranged matters to suit his views. He and the Tonkaway mounted their own horses, Randal riding that of Mollie Meredith, while Turtle led the two captured mustangs. In this order, the trio started.

The timber was soon reached. The mustangs were secured to trees, in such a manner as to allow them to graze; and relieved from these two animals, the party now proceeded with caution, westward, under cover of the timber, until the point was reached, where the wagon had been rattled down into the lake by the affrighted mules, and where the six Apaches had been slain and scalped.

Here it was found that the corpses had been removed, and the three men proceeded on until near the Apache camp, when they dismounted and secreted their steeds, not daring to take them further.

Going a little nearer without having seen a sentinel, they concealed themselves in a thicket and waited.

But a short time were they thus crouched, when the fearful sounds made by the Indians in their dance around the dead braves reached their ears. These sounds were understood by both Old Rocky and Turtle.

They were satisfied now that one or both of the captives were in the camp, and would serve as targets for the vengeful yells and gestures of the savages.

Soon the sounds ceased, and all remained silent for some time. Then, when the old scout was about to proceed, his red pard, by a gesture, bade him remain; at the same time the latter threw himself flat, pressed his ear to the earth, and listened intently.

But only for a moment. The Tonkaway arose, laid his hand upon the arm of Old Rocky, and drew him across to the northern side of the thicket.

There, upon peering through the bushes, they beheld a singular, but, to Turtle, not an unexpected sight.

This was the Apaches bringing their dead through the wood, and directly toward the thicket in which our three friends had concealed themselves.

They now drew weapons, and crouched ready for business, although they felt that a conflict at this time would hazard the lives of the captives.

Much to their relief, however, the Apaches made halt before reaching their covert, and laid their dead, side by side, upon a little moss-grown bank.

This done, they returned in single file to their camp, without leaving any of their number to guard the slain. This proved conclusively to the scouts, that their presence was not looked for in the vicinity.

Everything, so far, was working favorably toward the release of the captives, and the Tonkaway was jubilant.

"What in thunderation air up now? They've started a fresh circus, an' I l'ows ter take a back seat without a ticket; though I'm a long ways from bein' a dead-head, said Old Rocky."

The Tonkaway well knew that preliminary ceremonies were now being performed, preceding the condemnation of the captives to torture. When the sounds became louder and louder, they were correctly interpreted by Old Rocky also, and he advised an immediate inspection of the camp by Turtle and himself, leaving Randal in the thicket, to take charge of the rifles.

The Tonkaway and Old Rocky now sprung each into the low branches of huge trees, and disappeared from the view of Randal, who was racked with agonizing concern in regard to Mollie, but retained sufficient self-command to await the investigations of his companions, whose skill he could not question.

Little did the Apaches dream, as they dragged Captain Meredith upon the fallen tree, and bound him, that their two most relentless enemies were above him, watching every movement, ready to take any advantage, and to risk their lives in an attempt to rescue him and his daughter from torture and death.

If the scouts had not understood the situation, they would, under the excitement of the moment, when they saw Mollie dragged to the spot, have darted down to her rescue. But they well knew

that the attempt would probably result in the death of all.

Old Rocky made his way amid the tree-tops, to a position from which he could gain a view of the Apache camp. He reasoned that the alligators would not advance upon the shore, to endanger the life of the maiden until after nightfall; the presence of Captain Meredith being sufficient guard against this.

The Apaches, evidently, were not well acquainted with the nature and habits of the alligators, or they would have known this; especially after considering the fresh scent left all about the bank by their tramping. Besides this the saurians could not be ravenously hungry, for the waters literally teemed with huge catfish.

The old scout soon saw a brave return, spring upon the log, and thrust a mass of water-dripping moss upon the head of Captain Meredith, replacing him, upon recovery, upon the log.

The position of the old man was necessarily high up in the tree; and he could see no way in which he could, with safety, inform the captives of their probable release.

While deliberating, Turtle came up, and said in a low voice:

"So many Apache ride to mesquites,"—holding up all his fingers and thumbs extended; "same many go east, where have fight when wheel-lodge come to lake. Follow trail, Apache, squaws. Better stay in lodge."

"Dang my cats, Tonk! Ef thet ain't ther bestest news I hes heerd in a month o' New Years. Ef we-uns hain't gut ther dead-wood on ther outfit, an' a soft thing on savin' ther cap'n an' ther leetle gal, I don't know nothin'. Why hesn't ther kiotes planted ther corpses?"

"Wait, wait, have big dance when get Turtle and Old Rocky. Want dead captive in dance. Spirit of warriors no start on long dark trail. Want scalps of enemies, then go. Howl in live Apache ears. No eat. No sleep. Heap scare."

"Dog-gone ef ther sperits won't hev a heffy time fer linger, afore they hes ther satisfac' o' knowin' thet our heads air skinned! So they'd better start fer ther 'Pache kingdom come right away. But, I sw'ar, we-uns must slope, er ther cusses what glides east mought run in on Benny an' Marm Meredith."

"Thar ain't no danger o' ther cap'n an' Mollie bein' tortur'd, ontill ther two parties comes back. Thet's dead sure, fer they don't want ter miss ther circus."

"Alligator crawl up when dark come. Wait—Turtle send totem to Mollie. She know friends in wood."

"How in thunderation yer perpose ter do hit?"

"Wait," replied the Tonkaway, laconically. Taking a long fish-line from his pouch, Turtle attached one of his eagle-feathers to it, and proceeded to lower it.

"Dang hit, Tonk! Thar war a 'Pache down thar, a bit ergo," said the old scout, apprehensively.

"Apache gone to camp. Turtle see. Wait!" A moment more, and the eagle-feathers brushed the cheek of the young girl; whose face, however, could not be seen by the watchers. Mollie, by this time, had revived.

Only for an instant, the signal of hope, and release and life fluttered before her eyes. She recognized the line, and the eagle "totem."

"Father!" she cried out, in her almost heavenly relief, her eyes bent upon the fluttering eagle-feather, which arose through the branches.

Quickly Captain Meredith looked at his daughter, and followed the direction of her gaze.

Assisted by the changed countenance and manner of the young girl, he too recognized the fluttering feather as the signal of help and release, as it now slowly disappeared among the dense and lofty shades of the moss and leaves.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CIRCUMVENTED AT EVERY POINT.

QUIETLY descending the tree, the two scouts returned to the thicket in which the anxious Randal awaited them.

Old Rocky quickly relieved the young man's mind by saying:

"Mollie an' ther cap'n air in ther 'Pache camp. They're alive an' kickin', an' we-uns 'lows ter yank 'em out, right side up with care, somewhar about sundown."

"Don't worry er ax questions. Hev yer see'd ary o' ther condemned scum o' ther Pecos since we-uns leaved?"

Randal's face had brightened wonderfully as Old Rocky spoke, and he answered in a tone far different from any he had previously used:

"Yes, I have seen ten warriors. They were mounted and passed quite near my hiding-place, but I was prepared to sell my life dearly. They pointed down the lake, and seemed to be wrought up to a state of perfect frenzy as they passed the dead braves yonder."

"Things air workin' ter win," was the old scout's reply; "an' we-uns must skip down lake ter see what ther kiotes air 'bout. Hit'll be noon afore they strikes out on ther perrarer arter nosin' roun' arter 'sign'. Ther party what's gone ter ther mesquites 'll hev a ormighy time of hit, howlin' over ther stiffs we-uns lassoed."

"Howsomever, 'bout ther time they gits hot on ther hum stretch, we-uns 'll be hunky-dory, es well es Miss Mollie an' ther cap'n; an' we'll gi'n 'em a surprise-party that'll 'stonish 'em."

All three now repaired to the place where they had left Mrs. Meredith and Benny, when they hitched up the mules, and all departed for the vicinity of the Apache camp.

The thicket, which had formerly served as a covert

for the scouts and Randal, was now made to serve the same purpose for Benny and his mother; the boy mounting guard, his rifle ready for any emergency.

Again Turtle ascertained, from the tree-top, that the captives were just as they had last seen them. It was but too apparent, however, that with the small force at the command of the scouts, and the proximity of the Apache camp, the captain and Mollie would have but little chance of escape. Hence, Old Rocky formed a plan of his own.

There was one fact in connection with the danger of the captives, of which the scouts were ignorant; for they had not observed the pieces of horse-flesh, by which the Indians intended to lure the alligators upon the bank, and to the very feet of poor Mollie.

Perhaps no more hellish torture could have been devised than that which the Apaches had invented. The savages had no idea of the relationship of their captives to each other, but they had doomed the man to witness the fate of the maiden—a fate which was also to be his own.

When Captain Meredith and his daughter comprehended the import of the suspended eagle-feather, they were satisfied that the faithful Tonkaway was near at hand, and at work toward their rescue. But, as time passed—oh, so slowly!—and their limbs began to swell, from the torturing cords, suffering at the same time from hunger, and thirst, and want of sleep, they were driven to the very borders of insanity.

Then, as night approached, and the hideous, slimy saurians came nearer and nearer, then it was that both father and daughter became more and more agonized and hopeless. Could it be that Turtle had deserted them, and that this night was to be their last?

There seemed no other conclusion for them to arrive at.

At this time the bottom timber was wrapped in gloom and silence, save the low murmurs in the Apache camp.

One mammoth saurian dragged his huge length along until within five feet of the horror-stricken girl; then, after a pause, it threw its slimy body forward on its fore-paws, and snapped at the ragged, hanging drapery of the almost paralyzed girl.

This was the last straw!

This broke the spell of horror! Out over the lake and through the arches of the timber echoed shrieks that would have transformed a stupid dolt into a rescuing hero.

The first cry of the anguished girl seemed to be the signal for a sudden change—and what a change!

Through the vast natural archway dashed three pairs of blinded mules jerking a wagon after them, and on the wagon—ye gods, what a sight!

Standing and sitting, secured to the hoops and sides, and seats, were a dozen dead Apache braves, all scalpless, one ear being severed from each, and with their sightless eyes fixed ahead.

On, like a chariot of avenging demons, dashed the wagon, until in the middle of the Apache camp!

The Indians, at the shriek of Mollie, had started to their feet, but no sooner had they done so than this terrible load shot into their midst, and at once they bounded with yells of horror from the spot.

But as the wagon halted, up from among the dead arose four living ones, and each brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired into the massed savages.

"Jump, Randal and Benny! Jump, an' skute to 'ard ther drink, fer ther cap'n an' Mollie! Tonk an' this hyer ole raw-hide ripper 'll salerwate ther hellyuns ontill they er we-uns weakens!"

As Old Rocky spoke, his revolver and that of Turtle poured a rattling fusillade into the demoralized Apaches, whose arrows flew wild, and their war-cry soon changed into death-howls and dying groans.

Dashing madly through the undergrowth, little Benny came directly upon the slimy saurian, which bounded upward as his rifle-shot took effect in the eye of the reptile, a whisk of his tail hurling the boy's rifle into the air, as the beast rolled into the lake.

Equally as headlong in his advance, Randal broke from the bushes at a point where Captain Meredith, with mingled relief and concern upon his ghastly face, was in his immediate front. Like a panther, the young man rushed, knife in hand, to the side of the captain, and quickly severed his bonds; but, at the same moment, he caught sight of poor Mollie, who had fainted with horror, and from her position appeared to be already dead.

Relinquishing his hold upon the captain, Randal darted toward the maiden, cut her loose from the sapling, and folded her in his arms; while Captain Meredith, free from his bonds, and helpless as a child, fell into the lake, like a stone.

The brave boy however, was equal to the occasion. Springing into the water, and evading the dying alligator, he dragged his helpless father up the bank.

Just then, the shooting suddenly ceased, and the voice of Old Rocky was again heard in command:

"Fotch 'long Miss Mollie an' ther cap'n lively, er ther t'other condemned kiotes 'll run in on us, an' sp'ile our leetle circus! Whoop-er-up, boyees!"

Randal, with the rescued maiden, was at the wagon, by the time that Turtle had cut loose the horrid corpses, and flung them to the earth. Then, grasping Mollie from the arms of the young man, he said:

"Get Big White Chief, quick!"

Back went Randal, and with Benny's help, the captain was placed in the wagon. The rifles were recovered and reloaded, and then Old Rocky gathered the reins, clutched the "black-snake," and yelled:

"Jark off ther rags, Tonk, an' jump in! This air a free ride back, fer all hands."

The cloths were torn from the eyes of the mules, and Turtle sprang into the wagon; the old scout

lashing the mules, at terrific speed, back the way that they had come. The wheels crashed over dead and dying braves; not one barring their way, the survivors being appalled at the terrible sight, and the wholesale death occasioned by the rifles and revolvers of the scouts. All who were able to fly had dashed into the shades, in superstitious terror.

A brief halt was made at the thicket; barely long enough to take up Mrs. Meredith and her couch, thus restoring husband, wife, and daughter to each other.

Then, away galloped the team again, out from the timber, upon the open prairie, still keeping up a headlong speed toward the mesquites and the Rio Frio.

Soon, a yell of exultation from Old Rocky attracted every one, and the old scout, pointing with his whip in the direction of the Souze Lakes, where galloped madly a score of Apache braves, yelled:

"Sarcumvented ther greasy sons o' Satan! Dang my cats, ef we ain't roarin' ragers! Whoop-er-up! Whooper-e-e-e! Hurra-a-a fer us! Bully fer we-uns!"

Notwithstanding the numbers of the enemy, the appearance of the wagon, upon the trail of which they had been the best part of the day, coming out from their own camp, driven by Old Rocky, the hated Tonkaway riding in the rear, and the white boy who had disappeared so mysteriously from the barricade, all this so amazed the Apaches, and filled them with superstitious wonder, that they never thought of pursuing them.

Just the opposite. They lashed their mustangs toward their camp at terrific speed, unheeding the taunting war-whoop of the Tonkaway, who raised a mass of fresh Apache scalps upon his rifle-barrel, and flaunted them in mockery the most aggravating and terrible.

CHAPTER XIX.

"SWEET ARE THE USES OF ADVERSITY."

THERE remains but little to be told, as the intention has been to recount only the perilous adventures of those who have acted a part in our truthfully-drawn frontier story.

As may be well imagined, Captain Meredith had quite enough of border life, when, having sought to establish a ranch on the Souze Lakes, he so narrowly escaped serving as food for the shiny monsters in their gloomy depths.

All recovered somewhat upon reaching the Rio Frio. They made no stay, however, but kept on to the Rio Medina. There, the captain purchased a small ranch, as he had but little means remaining.

Mrs. Meredith, although for a long time suffering from the exposure, hardship and horrors of the Souze Lakes trip, eventually recovered; and, to the great joy of her family and friends, regained much of her youthful health and vigor.

From the date of his rescue, Captain Meredith was a changed man; being filled with gratitude to God, and to the brave men, who had risked so much to save him and his. From the time that Randal Rockwell released him from the fallen tree, the captain formed a strong liking for the young man; realizing, at last, his nobleness of character in sacrificing his own interests and braving every danger, to defend the maiden whom he must have loved more devotedly than aught else in the world.

Ever after, much to the delight of all, Captain Meredith and Randal Rockwell were to each other as father and son. The young man, indeed, soon after, did become his son by marriage with the beautiful Mollie. Old Rocky and Turtle were present at the wedding, and received many valuable presents from the bridegroom, who, to the surprise of every one except Mrs. Meredith, who had reasons for supposing that he was, or one day would be, well off in this world's goods, proved to be possessed of considerable property.

The father of young Rockwell was a wealthy man, but the latter had left his home through a feeling of independence, determined to win a name for himself.

He had now written home, however, to New Orleans, of his prospects and marriage.

An affectionate invitation was returned to him, to extend his bridal tour to the Crescent City. Randal complied, and a very happy visit it was to his father and mother, who at once fell in love with their charming daughter-in-law.

In a year from the marriage, a stately mansion—for that section of the country—was erected by Randal, on the Medina. The house of Captain Meredith, also, was rebuilt, with extensive corral; a large tract of land being purchased, the two men engaged as partners in stock-raising, and prospered well.

Young Benfold Meredith never forgot the terrible scene that met his eyes when he sprang from the thicket on the border of Souze Lake.

Ever after he hated and abhorred alligators, making war upon the amphibious monsters whenever opportunity offered. Often, indeed, the youth would watch through long nights to kill one, when its haunt became known to him. He always shuddered when he thought of the narrow escape of his sister from being devoured by the slimy saurians.

Such, indeed, was his hatred for these denizens of the water-holes, lakes, and rivers of Texas that he became so noted in connection with their slaughter as to be dubbed "Alligator Ben," much to his own disgust and regret.

He grew, however, to be a noble specimen of a young Texan. As such, he has been many a time seen, scouting in company with his old and tried friends:

"OLD ROCKY AND HIS RED PARD,

"TURTLE, THE TONKAWAY."

THE END.

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